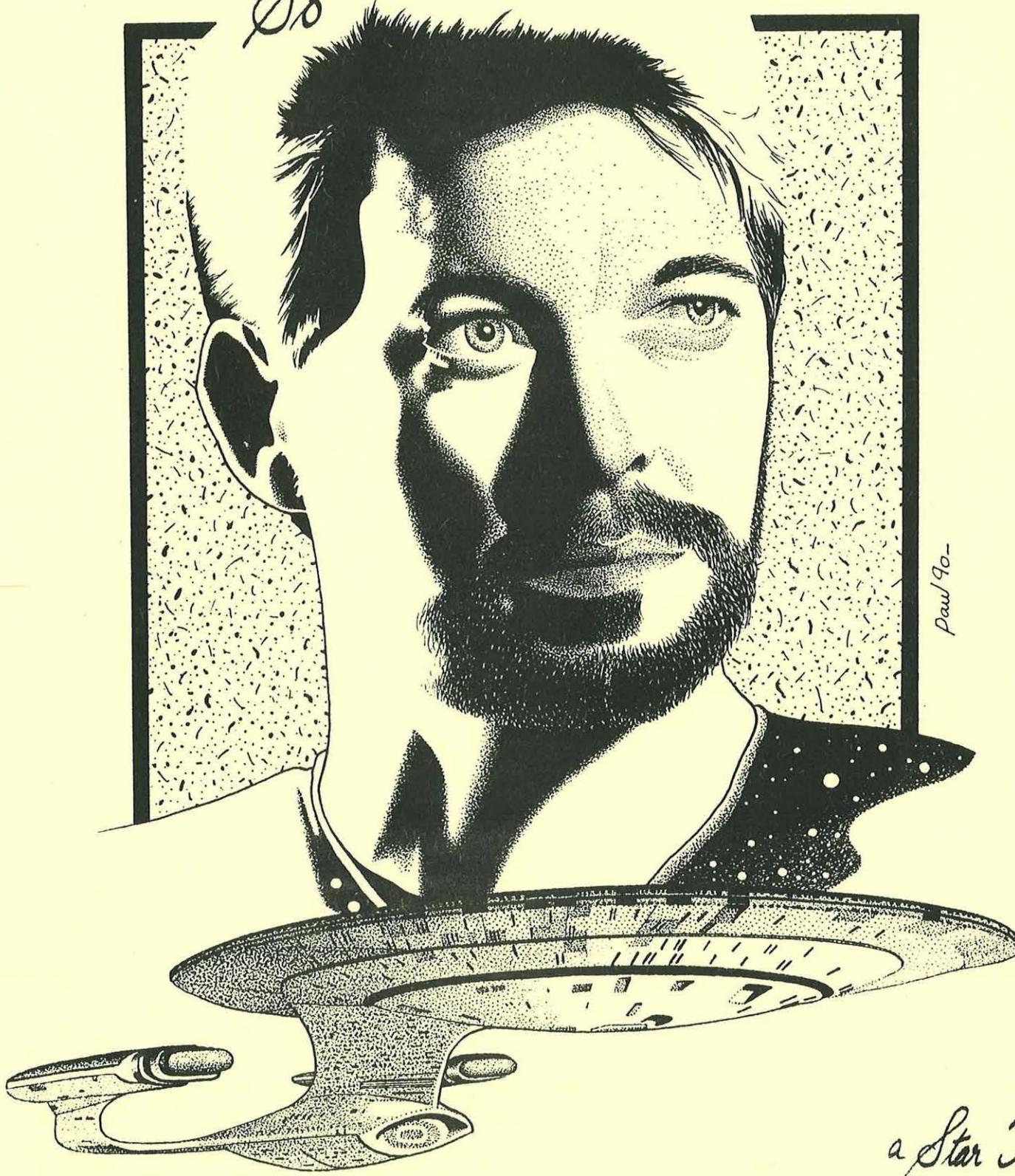


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A ScoTpress publication

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Distracting - Shona & Cindy

Make It So 7 is put out by ScoTpress and is available from -

Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
Strathmartine
by Dundee
Scotland

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.....OR YOUR DREAMS WILL COME TRUE

by

Marie Chettle

Riker did not know just when the dream had started. It seemed to have begun the moment his head hit the pillow, which was probably the reason why it seemed so real.

It was like a collection of pictures that kept being flashed in front of him. There was one of the Enterprise glowing red, and one of Data being dismembered. There were many others, but there was one that worried him the most - not only because it was shown the most, but because it involved Deanna.

It showed her in her room; she was lying down on her bed, staring at nothing. Suddenly the picture stopped moving and there was only Deanna lying on the bed. Then she started to glow. The glow spread slowly from her, growing bigger until it enclosed her in a kind of bubble. Then she started to rise towards the ceiling of her room, but stopped a few inches before reaching it. During all this her eyes remained open, and yet all life seemed to be gone.

Suddenly he could feel her presence near him. It was then that he noticed the thing in the corner of the room.

It was a glowing bubble-like object. It seemed to be solid. Then it moved towards Deanna. He could hear her talking to the alien object, but he could not understand what was being said.

No.

The word seemed to spring from nowhere, and it took Riker a few seconds to realise that it came from Deanna. "No, I won't go," she was saying, although she had not moved from the moment she was encased in the bubble.

Suddenly a worried voice said, "Go? Go where, Deanna?" It took a moment for Riker to realise that it was his own voice, yet he was not sure how he had spoken.

"Bill, is that you?" Deanna asked, somewhat surprised. "How can you be here, listening and talking in your mind?"

"It's all right, Deanna; it's only a dream."

"It's not a dream."

All at once he could see Deanna standing in the room by the bed, looking at her body. She had the most frightened look on her face; Riker was worried that she was going into shock. Then, slowly, she began to shrink in towards the centre of the room.

"Help me, Bill!" she cried. "Help me, Imzadi. Help me!"

"Deanna! Deanna!" Then she was gone.

"DEANNA!" Riker shouted, and awoke with a start.

It's all right, Riker told himself. It was only a dream. But was it? Riker was not sure. Deanna had told him that it wasn't, and she had never lied to him. The worry suddenly returned.

Hitting the intercom, Riker said, "Security, this is Commander Riker. Send a security team to Counselor Troi's quarters." His order was acknowledged.

Riker was already on his way to Troi's quarters when the message from the security team came through. "Sir, you had better get here fast. A message has already been sent to the Captain."

Riker stopped, the worry returning. "I'm on my way."

He could hear the blood pounding through his veins as his heart beat faster at the thought that his 'dream' was true. Then he started to run.

He was moving at a brisk jog when he reached Troi's quarters. He stopped short of the doorway and crept slowly forward, dreading what he would see. He peered through the door.

There was Deanna just as he had seen her in his dream. She was floating in the same glowing bubble exactly the same distance from the ceiling.

"Number One."

Riker jumped at the sound of the Captain's voice. He turned to see Picard standing next to him in the doorway.

"Dr. Crusher and Mr. Data are on their way to make sure the Counselor is all right and to analyse that bubble she's in. Ensign Green tells me it was you who ordered them to the Counselor's quarters?"

"Yes. Em..." Riker began to worry how to explain how he knew about Deanna's problem and, if he told the truth about the dream, would the Captain believe him? Luckily, at that moment Dr. Crusher and Data arrived.

"Captain, has anything happened since you contacted me?" asked the Doctor, looking at Troi.

"No."

"Fascinating," said Data, with what could only be described as wonder in his voice as he stared into the room.

"Yes, isn't it... Mmm. How do we get her down so I can check her over?" asked Crusher.

"Now that's a problem," said the Captain, stroking his chin. "Data, see if you can work something out."

"We could try a small tractor beam."

"What small tractor beam?" asked Picard.

"The one my son has made," said Beverly Crusher with pride.

Picard looked from Data to her and back again. "Oh. Well, you had better get on with it." Data and Crusher moved away to talk to the security team, arranging for the tractor beam equipment to be brought to the room. "Well, Number One - where were we?"

During the previous conversation Riker had been staring at Troi. Now he snapped back to reality and searched his memory until he found what he wanted. "You wanted to know how I knew about Deanna."

"Yes - "

"Bridge to Captain." Relief spread through Riker at the sound of that call from the bridge.

"Picard here. Go ahead."

"This is Lt. La Forge sir. An unidentified vessel has just come into scanner range, sir. It is moving at an incredible speed."

"Any answer to hailing frequencies?"

"No, sir."

"I'm on my way." Picard tapped off his communicator insignia. "This is all we need, with the Counselor in this condition. Come on; we'll finish this discussion later." With that he started towards the turbolift, Riker at his heels.

"What's the situation, Lt. La Forge?" asked Picard as he and Riker stepped out of the turbolift.

"No change, sir. No answer to hailing frequencies and our scans are just being bounced back."

"Hailing frequencies ready," said Picard as he moved to the middle of the room.

"Hailing frequencies ready."

"This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the USS Enterprise calling unknown vessel. Please identify yourself."

From behind there came the whoosh of the turbolift doors opening. Picard turned to see Data, Wesley Crusher and Dr. Crusher entering. Data and Wesley had their heads bowed in deep discussion. Then Data moved over to replace the Ensign on the Ops console, and Wesley moved over to stand with his mother. Picard was just about to order them to leave when -

"Incoming message, sir."

"Captain." The voice sounded familiar. "Captain, can you hear me? This is Counselor Troi."

"Counselor! But how? You are in your quarters. Are you all right?"

Riker's heart began to beat faster at the sound of Deanna's

voice.

"I'm all right, sir."

"What do they want?"

"I don't know yet. But it seems to be important to them."

"Why have they taken you?"

"They have only taken my mind, Captain. They need me. I am the only one who can talk to them and you."

Understanding spread across Picard's face. "So they need you to tell us what they want."

"Yes."

During this conversation Riker had been staring at the picture of the vessel on the viewer and listening to Troi's voice. Slowly a picture began to form in his mind. It was of Deanna in a room with lots of the glowing bubble-like objects.

Suddenly her voice became worried. "No, you can't!" Then it became frightened; she shouted, "Bill, close your mind!"

"What?" said Riker drowsily, still seeing Deanna in the room.

"Close your mind! No, please don't!"

There was a piercing scream from Commander Riker as a blinding pain stabbed through his mind. Falling to his knees with his head between his hands, Riker screwed his eyes shut as he tried to deaden the pain. Slowly he began to rock backwards and forwards, moaning with pain.

Turning sharply at the scream, Picard was the first one to reach Riker. Kneeling in front of him he shouted, "Dr. Crusher!"

Crusher was already halfway towards the fallen man. She was beginning her check of him when Data said, "Communication to the unknown vessel has been cut."

Gradually the pain in Riker's head dulled to a slow throb. Slowly he moved his hands back down to his sides, and turned his head to look at Crusher.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Fine... I think."

"Good," came the reply from the Captain. "Everyone - I want to see you all in my ready room immediately." He started to move towards the ready room, followed by the rest of his officers. "You too, Ensign Crusher," said the Captain. Wesley followed Data into the room.

Dr. Crusher helped Riker to his feet. He swayed a little as dizziness crept over him. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Fine," said Riker again. "Just a little dizzy." He thought it better to keep the fact that his head still throbbed a secret. *No use to have them worrying over me when there are more important*

things to worry about, he said to himself. Leaning on Crusher, Riker slowly moved towards the ready room. Once he was inside, Picard waved him to his own seat.

"Thank you, sir," said Riker, a smile slowly spreading across his face as he sat down.

Picard smiled quickly back, then, turning to face the rest of the crew, asked, "What did you find out about that glowing bubble, Mr. Data?"

"Nothing much, I am afraid, Captain. The bubble is solid and tough. Other than that - nothing."

"Nothing?"

"No, but we did have a small problem with the tractor beam."

"What problem?"

"I think Wesley had better explain."

"Ensign?"

"Sir," said Wesley, "the small tractor beam did not work, even on full power, so we had to use more of them."

"How many more?"

"Five, sir."

"Five!"

"Yes, sir."

"And what does that mean?"

"It means that the bubble is very strong."

"How strong?" asked Picard.

"They used enough power to hold a small vessel," Wesley replied.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. Data has checked my figures."

"All right. Thank you, Ensign." Picard sat down on the corner of the table. "Dr. Crusher, your report please."

"Well, Deanna is alive and well as far as I can tell - at least, her body is. Her mind? I don't know." Crusher walked up and down the room, her hands clasped together in a praying position. "How long will she live in that bubble? Unknown. From my readings, I have found that her body functions have been slowed down dramatically, so she does not need any nutrients to live - at least, not for quite a long time."

"So she could live like that for years?" asked Picard.

"Yes, that's basically it."

"Thank you, Doctor. Now, Number One," Picard went on as he turned to face Riker. "Let's return to that conversation we were having before, about how you knew about the Counselor early enough to send a security team to her quarters."

"Ah... Em..." said Riker worriedly. "Well, sir, I don't know how to say this..."

"Just say it, Number One."

"I'm not sure you'll believe me."

"Oh, I'll believe you."

Riker rested his arms on the table's edge and clasped and unclasped his hands nervously. Looking uncertainly at his hands, Riker started, "I had a dream..." Slowly he lifted his head to gaze into Picard's eyes.

"A dream?" Picard asked, surprised.

Riker nodded, and slowly looked around the room at the astonished faces of his colleagues. Quickly he looked back at his hands, which began to clasp and unclasp again. "A dream," he repeated. Worry slowly crept into his thoughts. *What must they think of me. They must think I'm a fool... or mad,* were among the thoughts that passed through his mind in those few seconds before Picard said,

"Tell us about this dream."

"Well, there were a few things happening before the main part - the part which involved Deanna."

"What happened in the main part?" Picard asked patiently.

"Well, I saw Deanna lying on her bed staring at the ceiling. Then she began to glow and the glow gradually spread from her until it encased her in that bubble. Then it floated up and stopped just short of the ceiling. There was a glowing bubble object in the corner... it moved towards her. I could hear them talking together."

"Talking?" asked Picard.

"Yes."

"Do you know what was being said?"

"No - not to begin with. Then I heard Deanna say, 'No.' Then 'No, I won't go.'" You must understand that she had not moved since she was encased in the bubble. Then somehow I said 'Go? Go where, Deanna?'"

"What do you mean, 'somehow'?"

"In my dream a voice said those words. It took me a moment to realise that it was my voice," said Riker slowly, looking up at Picard, worried at what he might see there, but Picard's face was blank. "Then Deanna asked if it was me and how I could be listening and talking with my mind." He looked back at his hands. "I told her it was all right, that it was only a dream. She said that it wasn't. Then I could see her standing by the bed looking at

herself. She began to shrink in towards the centre of the room. She cried to me for help," Riker went on, careful to leave out the fact that she called him 'my Imzadi'. "I called her name." His voice broke. "But she was gone, and I could not stop her." He slowly raised his head to look at Picard again, with eyes glistening with tears that he would not allow to fall. "Then I woke up."

"That's when you called Security?" asked Picard.

"Yes," whispered Riker, his voice breaking again. Then, quickly pulling himself together, said, a little louder and more controlled, "Yes."

"Right. And what happened out there on the bridge?" asked Picard as he started to pace the room.

"I don't know. One minute I was listening to Deanna and looking at the vessel, the next, I could see Deanna. She was standing in a room with a lot of these glowing bubbles I saw before. It was kind of like I was daydreaming."

Nodding, Picard turned round. "And then what happened?"

"Well, you know what happened. She shouted at me to close my mind - which I couldn't do, even if I wanted to, and then this pain stabbed through my head." With that, Riker leaned back in his chair and placed his hands on his lap. He then looked at the Captain.

"Thank you, Number One. Right - anyone else have anything to report?" The Captain paused. When there was no response, he went on, "Number One, I want you to go to sickbay and be checked over."

"But I'm all right, Captain," Riker protested. "I don't need to go to sickbay."

"After what happened out there just now, I think you had better be checked out."

"But I'm needed on the bridge, sir."

"I think we can manage without you for a little while."

"But..."

"Sickbay, Number One, and that's an order," said Picard angrily.

"Yes, sir," Riker muttered in a voice that showed that if it had not been a direct order, he would still be trying to get out of it. Slowly rising he left the ready room with Dr. Crusher following. Turning to the rest of the crew Picard said, "The rest of you, back to your stations." With that, they left the room.

Riker was lying on a diagnostic couch when Picard next saw him. Dr. Crusher was reading the medscanner. Riker turned his head at the sound of the doors opening.

"How is he, Doctor?" asked Picard, strolling up to the diagnostic couch.

Beverly looked up from the medscanner. "He's fine. His

readings are normal."

"Does that mean I can leave?" asked Riker hopefully, turning to look at her.

"Yes, but take things easy. You've had a nasty shock."

"All right, Doctor," said Riker as he practically leaped from the diagnostic couch. Suddenly his head was filled with the same pain as he felt on the bridge. He swayed a little.

"Are you all right, Number One?" asked Picard.

"Just a little dizzy still," Riker lied, leaning against the couch.

"I think you had better go to your quarters and lie down until that dizziness has gone," said Crusher.

"I'll be all right."

"No, Number One. Do as the Doctor says. Get some rest."

"That's an order?"

"That's an order, Number One."

Riker looked into Picard's face and saw a determination he knew he could not overcome. "All right," he said as he walked towards the doors that whooshed open automatically to let him through. Stopping just before he had passed right through, Riker turned and said, "But call me if anything happens. All right?"

"All right, Number One."

With that, Riker turned and left sickbay.

"How did Data find out about this?" asked Tasha.

"He was looking through the computer files a few days ago," replied La Forge as he sipped his drink, "and he discovered this." La Forge, Tasha and Worf were seated at a table in the Ten-Forward Lounge.

"And the Captain isn't going to tell us about it?" asked Tasha.

"Would you? If you were the Captain?"

"No, I suppose not. Who else knows?"

"Well, besides Data and us three, Commander Riker, Counselor Troi, Guinan, Dr. Crusher and Wesley."

"Wesley? How did he find out?"

"You know Wesley. If anything's a secret he'll find out about it."

"So what are we going to do about it?" asked Worf gruffly.

"What are we going to do?" La Forge replied, surprised. "We're

certainly going to do something."

"Why?" asked Worf.

"Because if it was one of us, the Captain would do something, so why shouldn't we?"

"That's true," said Tasha. "But what?"

"Well, I've got this plan. You see..." said La Forge, leaning forwards. Worf and Tasha also leaned forward to listen.

"Geordi," murmured Guinan. La Forge looked up at her and then to where she had barely nodded. There, just coming through the doors, was Captain Picard.

"Captain," said La Forge. Quickly the three of them settled back into their seats and picked up their drinks. After collecting his drink from the bar, Picard headed towards the table.

"Glad to see you relaxing," he said as he sat in the empty seat.

"Well, sir, you did say we ought to get some R & R," said La Forge, smiling.

"Speaking of which," said Tasha, "isn't it time we were getting to the holodeck?"

"The holodeck?" asked La Forge in some surprise.

"Yes. Remember that judo match we said we'd have against two black belts? Come on, or we'll be late. Coming to watch, Worf? Excuse us, sir."

With that, the three of them left.

"What judo match?" asked Worf quietly as they headed for the door.

"It's just an excuse, so we can carry on with the discussion about what to do about this information of Data's," said Tasha, looking around to see if anyone was listening, as they left the room.

Something's going on here, thought Picard as the others left the room. Off duty, my officers have been avoiding me for the last few days. But why? That's what you have to find out, Jean Luc. How does it look, you a captain of a Galaxy Class Starship and you don't even know what the crew is up to. Well, I'm jolly well going to find out.

With that thought still ringing in his head, Picard put down his glass and left the lounge, unaware of Guinan's eyes staring at the back of his head.

Riker decided to stop off at Deanna's quarters on his way to his own. As the door slid open he saw the mustard coloured uniforms of the engineering teams, who were seeing to the tractor beams, mingling with the teal-blue of the medical/science people as they studied the bubble and its occupant. As he looked around the room

he spotted a patch of grey, and studying it as it moved from one tractor-beam to another he finally realised that he was watching Wesley.

He's commanding those men well, thought Riker. He's going to make a good officer.

Then he turned to look at Deanna. She looked the same as before. He moved into the room and up towards the bed, and stopped where he hoped he would not be in the way. He then stood there and stared at her. *I wonder what's happening to you, he thought as he looked at her.* He stood there for a few minutes until he noticed the sideways glances the people in the room were giving him. *They know, he thought. They know about my dream. They must think I'm mad. Maybe I am. No! They can't know, so stop being paranoid. Rest - that's what I need.* With that thought Riker left to go to his quarters.

Picard had been walking round the ship for an hour and had found out nothing. Every time he got near any of his officers, they either stopped talking or started to speak about the new holodeck programme.

What's going on? thought Picard. Well, if nobody's going to tell me then I will just have to have a word with one of them in private. He was just about to go and find La Forge, as he seemed to be the ringleader in all of this, when -

"Bridge to Captain."

"Yes, Mr. Data?"

"Counselor Troi has just contacted the ship again. She wishes to speak with you."

"I'm on my way."

"Shall I call Commander Riker?"

"No. He's probably sleeping by now; let him sleep. Picard out."

But Riker was not asleep. He would have liked to sleep, but no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't drop off. As he lay there thinking he somehow knew that Troi had contacted the ship again.

They haven't called me, said Riker to himself. Why not? Ah - Picard must want them to let me sleep; but I can't, so I might as well be on the bridge. With that thought, Riker left his quarters.

"Captain, the beings would like Lieutenant-Commander Data to beam over," said Troi.

"Why?" asked Picard.

"I don't know, but it is important."

"No. I cannot risk one of my officers."

Instantly the ship shook as she was hit by a bolt of energy. Everything began to glow red. Then, just as quickly, the bolt faded again.

"Shields up!" said Picard. "Phasers ready."

"No response to controls, sir."

"What?"

"Captain," said Troi, "the beings want Data to beam over straight away."

"Captain," said Data, "it seems important to these beings that I beam over, and it may enable us to get the Counselor... em..." Data hesitated as he tried to find the right words.

"Back together?" suggested La Forge.

"Yes, back together," Data agreed happily.

A strange sound could be heard over the communications channel. It was Troi trying not to laugh.

"All right," said Picard. "It does not seem as though we have a lot of choice. Data, prepare to beam over."

"NO!"

The shout came from behind. Picard leaned forward and looked back at the same time, and saw Riker, whose hands had turned white with the force of the grip he had on the rail of the horse-shoe-shaped tactical station.

"Why not, Commander Riker?" asked Data.

"Yes, why not, Number One?" Picard demanded.

"Because you mustn't," Riker replied.

"Why not?" Picard sounded angry.

"Because of my dream," came the reply.

"Your dream?"

"Yes, Captain. Remember I told you that there were other parts to my dream before the part about Deanna."

"Yes."

"Well, the other parts were pictures," said Riker as he stepped back from the rail. "One picture showed the Enterprise glowing red."

"That has already happened."

"Yes. I know. That's the trouble. Another of the pictures showed Data."



"Yes, Number One?"

"I don't know how to say this without upsetting Data... "

"That is all right, Commander Riker. I am an android and am therefore unlikely to become upset. You may safely say what was in your dream."

"All right," said Riker sheepishly. Data tried so hard to behave as a Human that he had forgotten that. "In my dream, I saw Data being dismembered."

"Dismembered!" exclaimed Picard.

"Yes."

"I can understand why you would want to spare my feelings," Data commented. "Even an android cannot think of ceasing to exist with complete equanimity."

"Data, you will not beam over to that vessel," said Picard firmly.

Suddenly in front of the viewer floated three of the bubbles. They sped towards Riker and upon reaching him they threw him across the room. Riker landed between two consoles. A bubble enclosed him. Through it, sparks could be seen entering his head; and every time one entered he screamed in agony.

"Stop it!" shouted Troi. "It's not his fault! Stop it!"

But the attack continued as the rest of the bridge crew just stared helplessly at Riker.

"Stop it!" Troi repeated, nearly in tears. "It's my fault he knows! It's all my fault!"

The attack stopped, but Riker remained imprisoned in the bubble.

"What's your fault, Counselor?" asked Picard.

"That he can see those things in his mind."

"Explain."

"When we knew each other before, we were... er..." Troi hesitated.

"Yes?"

"We were... close, sir, and I taught him to receive my thoughts."

"Oh," said Picard, slightly embarrassed by the revelation of the previously private information.

The bubble released Riker; he dropped to the floor.

"Get Dr. Crusher up here," said Picard as he rushed over to his First Officer. "How are you, Number One?"

"Bruised, sir, and I have a headache." Riker groaned as he sat

up.

Picard smiled. "Don't move. Dr. Crusher is on her way."

He looked round, but the bubbles had disappeared. The bridge door opened to admit Crusher, who hurried over to Riker and began to check him over.

"He seems to be all right - physically, at least. I'll need to run some tests to make sure there's no damage to his head. You'd better come down to sickbay," she told Riker, helping him to his feet.

"No. I'm staying here."

"You need some tests to make sure there's no lasting damage."

"I'm fine. And I'm staying on the bridge until this thing is finished."

Crusher was about to continue arguing when she saw Picard, standing behind Riker, shake his head. "All right," she said reluctantly, "but report to sickbay straight after. Right?"

"All right."

Picard turned to the main viewscreen. "Counselor," he said, "do you know why these beings want Data?"

"No, but I will try to find out."

Silence fell over the bridge as all contact with the alien vessel stopped.

"Captain," Troi said at last. "They are afraid you will not help them after you hear why they are here."

"Unless we know why they are here we will not know if we can help them. But we will not surrender to threats."

There was silence again. Then -

"They have decided. They want Data to beam over so that they can see how he works. Then they can make their own androids."

"Why?"

"They have evolved so that they are only minds. But they need bodies for work they must do on their home planet."

Picard had been stroking his chin as he listened. He lowered his hand as he spoke.

"Why did they not just say this when they first arrived?"

"Because they were sure that you would say no," she replied. "They realise that we think of Data as a person."

"Captain, may I make a suggestion?" asked Data.

"Yes."

"Why not send over the examination reports of me that were done

when I was first found? That will contain all the information they need."

"Yes, we could do that."

"Sir," Riker cut in, "before you do that, you will need Starfleet authorisation..."

"Oh. Yes, of course. Lt. Yar, send a message to Starfleet. Give all the information on what has been happening here and ask for the necessary authorisation. Counselor, tell these beings what we are doing and that we should have a reply within a few hours."

The hours seemed like days before the reply from Starfleet arrived.

"Counselor," Picard said. "Tell the beings that the information they need is being transmitted over to their ship's computer."

"Thank you, sir. The beings are very happy about that. Oh - Bill. They are sorry about the attack on you. They thought you might somehow stop them from getting the information they needed."

"I understand," Riker replied.

"And what is going to happen to you, Counselor?" asked Picard.

"They are going to... put me back together as Geordi suggested earlier," she replied, with a soft chuckle. La Forge smiled.

"When?" Picard demanded. There was no reply. "Counselor? Deanna!"

"DEANNA!!!!" shouted Riker.

The bridge went quiet. Suddenly -

"Ensign Crusher to the bridge."

"Yes, Wesley," Picard replied evenly.

"A few seconds ago, Counselor Troi's body floated down to the bed and the bubble disappeared. She has just wakened up, sir. I think Mom should get down here as soon as possible."

Picard looked over at Crusher who was already heading for the turbolift. "She's on her way. Picard out."

Picard was in his office recording his log when the call from Commander Riker came through. "Riker to Captain Picard."

"Picard here."

"Captain, can I see you for a moment in the Officers' Lounge?"

"Why not in my office?"

"I have something to show you and it involves one or two other

people as well."

"All right, Number One, I'm on my way."

Riker turned to the rest of the crew gathered in the Officers' Lounge and smiled. "He's on his way," he repeated.

As Picard entered the Lounge the lights were turned down low. Picard spared a moment to wonder why. Surely they had power and to spare?

"Lights," he said. The lights came up.

"Surprise!" shouted the crew gathered there.

"What... ?" exclaimed a startled Picard.

"Happy birthday, sir," said Riker, approaching him with a drink.

"Number One, is this your doing?" Picard demanded, a little embarrassed as he took the drink.

"No. All the credit must go to Data and Geordi, with a little help from Wesley."

Picard nodded. "And how *did* you find out about this?"

"I found out," replied Data, who was wearing a paper hat with elastic tied around his chin, "when I was looking through the files some days ago."

"And you told everyone?" asked Picard.

"Only Geordi at first. Did I do wrong, sir?" he asked with a sad expression on his face. "I did not mean to. I will not do anything like this again if it is wrong. I am sorry, sir - I hope I have not - "

"It's all right, Data," said Picard. "It doesn't matter now. Let's just enjoy the party." Data smiled. "Oh - there is just one thing, though."

"Yes?" asked Riker warily.

"You're not making me wear one of those stupid hats!"

I C E W O R K S

by

Gaile Wood

Captain's Log, Stardate 47533.2.:

The Enterprise is en route for 'Moon', a mining community orbiting Alpha Draconis 255 in Sector 80.

Our assistance has been requested by Karl Raeburn, geologist in charge of the resident science team, to investigate some anomalies which have been appearing.

These seem to have taken the form of some kind of abstract sculpture, although Dr. Raeburn considers it obvious they are not. The engineers who form part of the mining company's personnel are divided as to their nature.

Data said, "Captain, we are approaching Alpha Draconis. Estimated time of arrival, ten point three minutes."

Picard raised his head. "Thank you." He glanced at Riker. "Would you join me, Number One? You have the bridge, Mr. Data." Picard went through the doors, closely followed by the First Officer.

The Captain sat heavily in his chair, then moved his fingers over the controls in front of him. Obediently, a 3-D image of the Alpha Draconis system sprang up in front of them. It revolved slowly.

Picard sighed; it was totally uninspiring. An F2 main sequence star with no habitable planets; nothing of any note save for a gas giant with a system of rings, and four minor satellites - and, of course, Moon.

They both regarded Moon and its primary glumly.

Riker leaned over the desk for a closer look. "It hasn't got a very good name for itself, has it?"

Picard regarded Riker with a bland expression. "Not to put too fine a point on it - a haven for the dregs of the galaxy."

"*Miners*, sir!" Riker grinned, then he shrugged his shoulders.

"*Miners*," agreed Picard. He looked at the image for a little longer, then pressed the controls once more, and Moon disappeared. "Have you decided on an away team, Number One?"

Riker sat down opposite the Captain, and nodded. "Commander Data, and Lieutenants Worf and La Forge."

"You don't want to lead this one yourself?"

Riker shook his head. "It'll be good experience for Data."

"Really, Commander? And what has led you to that conclusion - although far be it from me to question your judgement."

"Well..." Riker drew a breath. "He hankers to experience Humanity to its full extent - warts and all. And you must admit, sir, this place has plenty of warts."

"Too many, Number One," replied Picard.

"Sirs," Data's voice sounded in the ready room, "we are coming into orbit now."

Riker said, "Be right there, Data."

Commander Data stood and waited for La Forge and Worf to show up. While he waited, he was enjoying a conversation with O'Brien concerning the function of the transporters, and how they might possibly be improved.

O'Brien nodded politely, but he had a slightly glazed look to the eyes. Data noticed, and filed it for further examination at a more convenient time, as Worf and La Forge had just appeared.

O'Brien cleared his throat. "Are you ready, gentlemen?"

"Ready," Data said.

Geologist Karl 'Digger' Raeburn stood and watched as the three columns of light turned into Starfleet officers. He extended his hand to the android who was in charge - or so he had been informed - and then to the engineer and the burly Klingon.

"Very pleased to meet you. If you would like to follow me, I'll show you round."

Data glanced about with interest. "I understand we are not near the mining company's living area."

Raeburn eyed Data with interest. "D'you want to see it, then?"

"Very much," replied the android. "I have heard some interesting things about Moon that need verification. But as much as I would like to satisfy my curiosity, I believe it should be contained until a more suitable time."

Raeburn looked blankly at the other two officers. It was an expression that Data's friends were familiar with.

"He means maybe later," said La Forge. "First things first. Where are these things you want us to take a look at?"

"We'll have to go outside for that," Raeburn said. "If you're lucky, the shift that's just gone out will not have destroyed the one I was told about this morning."

La Forge raised his eyebrows. "They destroy them?"

"Yeah," drawled Raeburn. "The things come up in the damndest places. Last week, they had four - one right after the other - in the mine face. Then they just get ripped up."

They trailed after Dr. Raeburn into a largish room, and then through a door out into what passed for the open. The domes containing the atmosphere they were breathing shimmered overhead. Their breath misted, and drifted slowly away from them.

Data asked, "How much further?"

Raeburn said, "There is an air lock in that building over there, and we'll be able to get suited up. We can get to the site by taking a ground car." He looked at Worf critically. "You'll have to borrow one of my suits - we're about the same size."

Safely ensconced in their environmental suits, they stepped through the air lock onto the surface proper of Moon.

Dominating the horizon was Alpha Draconis VII, its giant multi-coloured rings arcing across the sky. They shimmered in Moon's thin atmosphere of hydrogen and methane, and under the away team's feet solid carbon dioxide, ammonia and water crunched.

"Not a very friendly place," La Forge observed.

Worf was quiet. His interest in the outing was nebulous - Data and the more garrulous La Forge asked the pertinent questions; it was after all not his field.

The ride was uneventful, and they arrived at the site of the object fairly rapidly.

Raeburn's voice sounded in their helmets. "Looks like we're really fortunate today." He pointed. "There she is. Let's get a bit closer."

Data craned his neck upwards. "It is very large."

Worf circled the artifact, checking the readings on the tricorder. "It is made of a vitreous element, Commander, and - ice?"

La Forge poked at it with interest. "Hmm - ice, eh!" He and Data examined the readings Worf had obtained, and La Forge went on, "Have you tried to make an analysis of the structure using - "

Raeburn snorted with disdain. "Look around you, Lieutenant, tell me what you see. Laboratories? Technical expertise? No! Plenty of mine shafts, and three environmental domes. And in those, miners - who are only interested in drinking, sleeping and fighting. Not necessarily in that order either, I might add."

Data said, "We shall need to take a sample back to the Enterprise for further research. Could I take this?" He lifted a piece of gossamer, and wiggled it.

"Take what you want," Raeburn said. "I just want to see this resolved as soon as possible."

With that, Data contacted the ship and had a large sample

beamed aboard. "We ought to return also," he stated, "to implement the examinations."

La Forge and Worf exchanged expressions of some surprise, and Geordi said, "You aren't going to look around, Data? What about your research?"

Data considered. "That is true," he agreed. "Very well," he decided. "If Dr. Raeburn will act as our guide."

Raeburn's face became doubtful. "I hope you realise what you are letting yourselves in for."

"C'mon, Doctor," said La Forge, "how bad can it be?"

Raeburn eyed him. "Oh, I think you'll be unpleasantly surprised."

Raeburn had taken them to what he referred to in passing as a tavern immediately on their return. The four now sat in squalid, and disreputable surroundings with some drinks in front of them.

La Forge picked up his glass. "Here goes nothing." He took a large mouthful, and swallowed it straight back - it proved to be a mistake. The liquid burned its way down his oesophagus, and then the fumes hit his delicate nose linings with instantaneous results. He found he couldn't breathe, and started coughing.

Alarmed, Worf pounded La Forge on the back, only stopping when Geordi put up his hand and shook his head. He finally managed to get a breath and, looking at the small glass with its amber liquid with new respect, he said hoarsely, "Thanks, Worf - but between you and that - I'm not certain what'd kill me first! What is that stuff?" He watched in awe as Raeburn drained his glass with no ill effects whatever.

Worf sniffed suspiciously at the glass, then drank his with little more than a slight raising of his eyebrows.

Raeburn spoke to La Forge, "The local hooch. If I'd known you were going to do that..."

Data tasted it with caution. He turned an accusing glance to the geologist. "That is alcohol. It is 83% proof."

"I know. You could clean metal with it," Raeburn replied good naturedly.

"This is illegal," Data declared.

"True," Raeburn agreed. "It's made locally. There's a still around here somewhere, but I've never been able to find out exactly where."

Worf said, "You have your own supply?"

Raeburn nodded. "D'you want some?"

Worf was very tempted, but shook his head. "It might prove difficult to explain."

Data then piped up. "Geordi, I have been observing the entertainer for some time, and I have come to the conclusion that she is not a she, but a he. Why would he seek to misinform these people as to his gender?"

Two pairs of eyes and a VISOR turned his way. The owner of one of the sets of eyes grunted, and took another drink. La Forge choked, and Raeburn asked, "Is he always like this?"

Data regarded his companions with innocence. "I do not understand. Would you explain?"

Worf shook his head. "No."

Raeburn looked at the Klingon, then at La Forge. "Why not - what harm can it do?"

Worf and La Forge sighed together. "Do you want to tell him, Worf, or shall I?"

The Klingon turned his attention to the geologist, "He will not be satisfied with your explanation - and will continue to ask more questions." Worf glared at the hapless Data. "He doesn't know when to shut up."

Data blinked his eyes, and changed the subject. "I believe there is a brawl about to start."

There was indeed a fight commencing, and as the tavern was filled to bursting point with drunken miners, it was akin to a powder keg. The fuse just had to be lit, and everybody should retire quietly - to a safe distance.

The milling crowd moved as one to allow through the antagonists, who numbered a good dozen. Things were getting nasty; a broken bottle could be seen to flash in the dim light which served as illumination.

"Time to leave?" suggested the android, and his three companions were forced to agree a strategic retreat was in order.

Raeburn led the way, and Worf took up the rear, keeping a sharp eye out for any trouble.

Worf sent a regretful glance over his shoulder towards the tavern; it would have been most interesting to stay.

Once they were well away, La Forge turned to Data. "Did you learn anything useful about Human behaviour?"

"Yes," Data said firmly. "It has been most instructive. But I will need some assistance in collating the information. Perhaps you would help, Geordi?"

La Forge regarded his friend. "With pleasure. But later, Data - much later."

Data tapped his communicator. "Three to beam up."

Raeburn was left alone on the sidewalk, and he made his way back to the scientific quarters.

La Forge and Data went directly from the transporter room to where the sample was undergoing a rigorous examination.

Data received the datapad the ensign presented to him with interest. "The spectrographic examinations reveal the ice is co-joined to the vitreous material to form a super hard frame. Fascinating."

La Forge could see the stresses the specimen seemed to be generating around it - even under these carefully controlled conditions. "It is very peculiar. I think we could do with a better look at these things, and a bigger sample, before we can say categorically what its nature is."

The Captain's voice interrupted their musing. "Lt. Data, Lt. La Forge, please report to transporter room three, to meet Dr. Raeburn and his colleague - an engineer named Anderson. They have another sample for you, and it is Dr. Raeburn's opinion that Mr. Anderson will be invaluable to you."

"Well, well," said La Forge. "You have but to ask and all your wishes will be fulfilled."

Data looked at him inquisitively. He opened his mouth.

La Forge waved his hand in that dismissive gesture Data had come to recognize.

"Not now?" He sounded slightly plaintive.

"You're learning, Data - you're learning."

La Forge raised his head from his hands, and groaned. "We're missing something vital."

Data gazed at his Human companions - all three of them wore weary faces; their enthusiasm had flown when the expected results had not readily appeared.

Anderson, a dour little man with sparse greying hair, tapped a staccato beat on the table. "Yes, we're missing something all right. We need to go back to have another poke round."

"Agreed," said Data.

Raeburn opened his eyes. "What good'll that do? We've already been back down a half dozen times. P'raps what's making 'em will show up - then we can all be happy."

La Forge said, "You're still of the opinion then that these are made, and not natural?"

Raeburn nodded, then closed his eyes again. "If you don't mind, I'll sleep on it."

Astounded, La Forge listened to the loud snore that issued from the geologist's mouth, and looked at Anderson. "He's really asleep?"

Anderson tipped his head affirmatively. "If you say something interesting though, he'll wake. It's an ability he's developed as a

refex to the boredom of Company committee meetings."

"Commander Data, report to the bridge."

Data stood. "If you will excuse me."

La Forge and Anderson nodded.

As Data left, Raeburn stirred. "What odds do you lay me that our missing aliens have just decided to leave a calling card?"

The calling card loomed on the main view screen impressively. Worf checked his console. "We are being scanned, Captain."

"Open hailing frequencies, Worf," Picard said.

"Hailing frequencies open, sir."

Picard stood, and stepped closer to the screen. "This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Starship Enterprise, representing the United Federation of Planets. We wish you no harm."

Riker said, "Don't raise shields, Worf. We don't want to appear provocative."

The Klingon replied, "Aye, sir."

"Any response, Lieutenant?" asked Picard.

"No." Then Worf checked again. "Sir, I have a visual image coming through."

"On screen, Worf."

The image showing on the screen did not make any sense; all they could see were bands of moving colours, bouncing wildly over what they took to be the ship's interior.

Data came onto the bridge and smoothly replaced the crewman at the Ops console. He examined the instrument readings. "Captain, the composition of the alien vessel correlates with the artifacts from Moon that we are studying at the moment."

"Thank you, Mr. Data. Worf, life readings?"

Worf shook his head. "None."

Riker glanced up at the Klingon, then over to Counselor Troi, who returned his look frankly. "Counselor?"

Troi concentrated. "There is life, but... I - " a crease appeared between her brows - "I can't grasp them. They are too fleeting."

Worf interrupted, "Captain, the signal is breaking up."

The bridge crew's attention riveted on the view screen as the image shattered, and then coalesced back into the alien ship.

"Hailing frequencies, Mr. Worf."

"No response, Captain."

"Are they doing anything else, Worf?" asked Riker.

"No - they seem to be just waiting for us to make a move."

Riker joined Picard and they both stared at the screen. Picard dragged his eyes away. "Mr. Data, are you able to access any information concerning our visitors?"

Data ran through his banks of information, and shook his head. "A new species, sir." He observed the ship carefully. "They would appear to be related to the App. There are certain similarities in ship design."

"Methane breathers," Picard sighed.

"Does that create a problem, sir?" the android asked.

Picard sighed again. "Only of communication, Data. The App and their ilk are so different from us that we have little common meeting ground. Even after a decade of contact, we still have no real translation of their language." He regarded the screen and its occupant again. "And now we have these people to deal with."

Data tilted his head in interest. "May I attempt to learn what we do know of the App language, sir? It could be a starting point."

"Carry on, Data. What have we got to lose?"

Captain's Log, Stardate 47534.5.: Commander Data's attempts to contact the aliens using the App language has not met with any great success. Although these people seem to have many points of similarity - such as their appearance, or rather, their lack of it - language does not seem to be one of them.

Lt. La Forge is able to confirm that the artifacts are mechanical in nature, and in all probability were placed on Moon by our visitors. He remains uncertain as to what the function of said artifacts might be.

The good thing about this situation is the aliens appear to be non-aggressive - a thing they have in common with the App.

Counselor Troi said, "No wonder I couldn't get a line on them, Commander. The App have multi-compartmented minds of great complexity, and it has been known for a fully fledged telepath to go out of control when they've integrated with them. This is one time when I'm glad I'm not a full telepath."

"No, it wouldn't do for the psychologist to lose her marbles." Riker's eyes twinkled at her as they went through the doors of the Ten-Forward lounge.

Troi spotted La Forge seated at a table with Data and a man she did not recognise. She made her way over to them.

"Geordi, Data." She smiled at her colleagues. "Are you going to introduce me to your companion?"

"Sure," said La Forge. "Counselor Troi, meet Dr. Karl

Raeburn. Dr. Raeburn - "he flourished a hand - "Counselor Troi, and Commander Riker."

Riker put the drinks on the table and grasped the proffered hand. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, sir."

Raeburn stood, offering his chair to Troi with a slight bow. "Counselor, please take my seat. I shall get another."

While the geologist retrieved a chair, Troi raised her brows at the men. "So gallant. Such a pleasant change."

La Forge stared into his drink, picking it up and swirling the ice in it round. "Digger likes women, and at the moment he is suffering from overload."

"Digger?" asked Riker.

Raeburn rejoined them, and he nodded at Riker amiably. "Yeah. Digger to my friends. It's almost as original as Moon."

Automatically, everyone looked out of the portals at the view, and Raeburn groaned. "Shouldn't have reminded you."

"Not something that can be helped at the moment," Riker said. "If only we knew what they wanted."

Shrugging, the geologist glanced around the table. "Unlikely to be the firestones - I gather these folk don't have much use for gimcracks. And from what Data tells me, they ain't got a use for heavy metals either."

They all lapsed into a reflective silence, sipping disconsolately at their various drinks.

"Have you learned anything new about our visitors, Data?" Riker broke the silence.

Data shook his head. "No, Commander. The App language does not proceed upon the same lines as any I have come across before. They seem to be physical in some way, with visual display and little vocalisation. The vocalisations are difficult for the humanoid larynx to reproduce correctly. And these people do not seem to be as closely related as I first assumed."

Riker said, "Thanks, Data - that's all I wanted to know."

"Oh."

"Commanders Riker and Data, report to the bridge."

Riker looked up in surprise. "A new development, Worf?"

Worf's voice was urgent. "Sir, the alien vessel is trying to beam something aboard."

Riker said, "We're on our way." He turned to the geologist, giving him a faint smile. "No peace for the wicked."

As he and Data left, Riker thought he heard Raeburn say something - it sounded suspiciously like, "I surely hope not."

.

On the bridge, Worf studied the instrument read-outs - there was no doubt about it, they were trying to beam something aboard. What he could not understand was how they had not yet managed to do it. The shields were not raised, after all.

Picard had reappeared from the ready room with alacrity, and was now standing beside the Klingon, observing. He said, as Riker and Data entered, "They are trying to beam directly onto the bridge."

"Are the shields in place, Worf?" asked Riker.

"No, sir."

Riker raised a puzzled face to Picard. He glanced at Data, who returned his regard from the Ops position. The android raised eloquent shoulders.

"Raise shields, Mr. Worf."

Worf ran his fingers over the controls. "Shields - "

He did not have time to finish the sentence. In the split second it took for the shields to become effective, in front of the viewscreen a shape was taking form, finally turning into - something. A suit that shifted and flowed with the wearer, and issuing from it a bone-chilling cold that froze the air surrounding it for a metre or more.

Bridge crew and alien regarded one another. At least, Picard thought they were being regarded. Worf had his phaser ready, but Picard placed cautionary fingers on his arm. "No, Lieutenant. We have not yet been threatened."

The visitor moved; it shed frozen air which cracked loudly in the silent bridge.

It moved first to the viewscreen, then on to the Con and Ops consoles, where it paused briefly, chiefly interested in Data. It moved slowly around the bridge, touching nothing - yet Picard was certain it examined everything in detail.

Then it was gone, and the bridge personnel were left wondering what had just happened.

Riker stared at the place where it had been. "Did I miss something?"

Picard looked at his First Officer. "You, me and everyone else, I should think."

Data was thoughtful. "It did examine me thoroughly, sir." He sat very still for a few moments, then addressed the Captain. "Sir, permission to - "

Picard nodded slightly. "Whatever you have in mind, Data - carry on."

"Thank you." Data rose and went to the science station. Vast quantities of material started to appear on the screens at a rate that no-one else could follow.

He turned finally to speak to all of those present. "I believe

I have found a possible reason for the lack of communication."

"Don't be shy, Data. Let's hear it," said Riker.

Data nodded. "My theory is these people communicate on other dimensional planes - using their bodies."

Picard leaned forward. "Go on, Commander."

"I believe they are extant on more than the four dimensions which we are familiar with: length, breadth, depth and time."

"Which would mean we are missing a great deal of what they are trying to tell us. Thank you, Mr. Data." Picard's voice was warm with approval. "But we still have a problem - how do we contact them if their language is so complex?"

"Ah," said Data. "Perhaps our visitor was sent precisely for those reasons."

"And in the meantime, we just wait - right?" Riker sat. "I hope they have more luck than us."

"Indeed," echoed Picard. "Indeed."

As it happened, the wait did not take as long as everybody had expected. The aliens took only twelve hours to come to a decision.

Worf said, "Captain, an incoming signal from the aliens."

"Put it through, Lieutenant."

A high pitched noise reverberated on the bridge, causing everyone momentary pain - it did not last more than a few seconds. The noise became recognisable as a voice repeating itself over and over, "We are the Kyph. Stand by for further information."

"A visual signal, sir," the Klingon rumbled from behind Picard.

"On screen, Worf."

The screen showed the same wildly bouncing scene they had seen before, then it steadied and they found themselves staring at a roughly humanoid face.

It opened its mouth and spoke. "Greetings. I am Rutilus - I speak for the Kyph."

Everybody waited, so did the image. Picard returned the greeting. "Welcome to Alpha Draconis VII. Who are the Kyph?"

Rutilus gestured vaguely behind itself. "You were visited by a Mistress of the Sight."

"You asked," whispered Riker to Picard.

Picard flicked a glance at his First, then ignored him. "Thank you, Rutilus. Are you Kyph?"

Rutilus stared out of the screen. "No. I am a mechanoid, built to serve the purpose of communication." It went on, "Your language

is brief, and you are hideous for the Kypth to look upon; violently brutish, short lived and white hot." It shuddered visibly. "You have no Sight."

There was a growl from behind Picard and Riker, "You're not so lovely yourself."

"Worf!" warned Picard. The Klingon subsided, but took some small satisfaction in glaring at the screen.

"What do the Kypth wish?" Picard asked.

Rutus appeared to be listening to something they could neither see or hear; it took a long time to reply. "We would speak with the mechanoid on your ship."

"How?"

"I shall transport to you - it would not survive long in the interior of this ship. I am built to stand such stresses."

"When will - ?" Picard started, and Worf said, "Sir!"

Once more an intruder stood on the bridge of the Enterprise - this time it was not suited. It was beautiful to look at, and faded into the distance at the edges somehow. Looking at it gave the bridge crew a collective headache.

"I can't seem to see all of it," said Riker.

Data heard and nodded. "That is the extra-dimensional effect I explained earlier."

Rutus flowed... walked? It moved to Data, then spoke. "Dismiss the others." Its face took in all of the staff.

Data watched the mechanoid closely. "Please leave, sir. I do not believe I shall come to any harm."

Picard did not like this, but he complied with the android's request, and gestured to the rest of the staff to leave.

Worf did not like it either, and said as much, but was quelled by a sharp gaze from Picard. "Data," the Captain said, "If you need us..."

"Thank you, sir, but I do not think that will be necessary."

"We shall be in the observation lounge," Picard stated to no-one in particular, and they all left.

Data was the centre of fascinated attention; everyone hung on his words. He was not certain if he liked it.

"So what did Rutus do exactly?" asked La Forge.

"It meshed with me."

There was silence. Worf said, "Meshed?"

Riker said, "Give 'em a little more detail please, Data."

"Rutus co-joined physically via my positronic synapses, then it inserted a filament of the material Geordi and I had been examining into one of the - "

"So what information was given to you?" interrupted La Forge hastily.

Data angled his head as he considered. "A great deal concerning the cultural elements of Kypth society. It seems they are a species of wide ranging abilities artistically. The artifacts on Moon were not mechanisms as suggested by Dr. Raeburn, but sculptures. Multi-dimensional - which was why we could not discern their nature accurately."

"Why Moon?" asked La Forge. "Its not a very pretty place."

"Not to us, Geordi." corrected Data. "The Kypth consider Moon to be exceptionally beautiful, and wish to turn it into an Art Gallery. The miners disturbed their efforts."

"Speaking of which - what is going to happen to them?" La Forge sipped at his drink.

Worf grunted, and muttered something under his breath.

Data said, "No, I do not believe Captain Picard mentioned anything of that nature, Worf."

The Klingon shot him a look from under heavy brows, and saw Riker and La Forge were grinning. He smiled a little grimly. "Perhaps not," he agreed. "Go on."

Data continued. "The Kypth have agreed to mine for the gems and ore on our behalf. They can do it without resorting to damaging the environment - something which Humans have not managed to do yet in such extreme circumstances. For this, they ask that we give them Moon for the purpose they conceived for it."

Riker nodded. "The Company was very receptive to this idea. Cheaper, less aggravation all round, and the miners get moved to somewhere more congenial to humanoid life forms."

"Seems everyone got what they wanted after all," La Forge said.

Data became quiet.

"You did get it all sorted, didn't you?" La Forge asked his friend.

"Yes," replied the android.

"Then why the long face?" Riker inquired.

Data said, "I would have welcomed another opportunity to research the habits of the mining community - particularly the entertainer."

"The entertainer?" Riker looked at Worf and La Forge with interest.

La Forge exchanged a glance with the Klingon, and said, "Yeah, an entertainer. Worf and me, we've got to be somewhere. Why don't you explain it to the Commander, Data. I know he'll help you out."

Riker watched the two officers leave Ten-Forward. Why did he feel he had just been had?

Data said, "Sir, the entertainer..."

warning

Ugly bags of mostly water, you exist only to kill.
 Bringing death and destruction is your greatest thrill.
 Ugly bags of mostly water, you desecrate our land,
 Plunder, changing, interfering in our water and our sand.
 Ugly bags of mostly water, your evil we shall fight.
 We shall send you from our planet despite your power and your might.
 Ugly bags of mostly water, why do you plunder and destroy?
 Take our world and destroy it, then discard your broken toy.
 Ugly bags of mostly water, all life's precious, can't you see?
 All should be allowed to live, you must go and let us be.
 Ugly bags of mostly water, you did not know that we exist.
 Go! Grow in peace and knowledge ere you come to see us next.

Helen Connor

ARMUS

I am evil, I've no compassion;
 To be amused my greatest passion.
 I'll decide who shall live or die;
 All you can do is ask me - Why?
 So entertain me - I'll keep you here,
 Beg and entreat me, let me see your fear.
 To me you are but simple fools,
 You, tin man, my killing tool.
 Don't give me your pity about how I live -
 I'll take what I want, but never give.
 Evil - my spirit has not ensnared.
I am evil - feel me with your every nerve.
 I am hatred, pain, unjust;
 I am the being ARMUS!

Helen Connor

THE DAEDELUS FACTOR

by

Gail Christison

"La Forge to transporter room," boomed Geordi La Forge. Close behind, guiding an anti-grav pallet loaded with scientific equipment, Lt. Cmdr. Data paused to listen to something crashing through nearby undergrowth.

"Two to beam up, Chief." La Forge moved to position himself alongside the pallet. There was a dull roar in the distance.

"Energise!" he commanded. In the same instant something broke from the trees and crossed the few feet between them. To Geordi's astonishment it ran straight up Data's back and perched precariously on the android's head.

Even as the Engineer opened his mouth to speak, the transporter effect began.

"Data, there's something on your - " But there wasn't.

The Enterprise's intruder alert was blasting and the creature had scuttled across the floor, claws clicking on the metal, passed O'Brien, who was busy calling Security and Exobiology, and, seeing a sudden chance for escape, shot beneath William Riker's not inconsiderable frame, through the open doors, and disappeared.

"What was that?" Riker demanded.

"Beats me." Geordi shook his head.

"It was caught in the transporter beam as we left the planet... sir," admitted Data.

The First Officer was not pleased. "You mean there's a living organism from that planet loose aboard this ship?

Andrews, the Exobiologist, charged in. "Where is it?" he panted.

"Not here. Find it Mike, and fast," Riker told the young scientist and strode out without another word.

Andrews tapped his communicator. "Lt. Worf?"

"Worf. Security."

"This is Lt. Cmdr. Andrews. Please scan the ship and identify whereabouts of life-form intruder. Also, have the ship's computer continue tracking it."

"Scanning," confirmed the Klingon.

Will Riker sighed as the doors closed, sealing him blissfully into his quarters. He was off duty and the events of the past months were beginning to catch up.

The upcoming shore leave couldn't have come sooner for the big man, whose world normally revolved around the giant Galaxy-class starship.

He was tired. More tired than he could ever remember. He refused to acknowledge the unbidden memories of Yuta, of his farcical trial, or of the painful reunion with his father. Rather, he deliberately chose to concentrate on his future.

As an evasion, it failed. He scowled and pulled himself out of the chair.

Pieces of clothing formed a trail across the floor as they were discarded.

One day, he mused as his skin began to tingle in the sonic shower, they're going to produce the perfect uniform... one that actually fits...

The shower finished, and he padded across the floor, noting absently as his massive frame passed a mirror that it wouldn't hurt to go easy on the sweets for a while.

Riker slid open a panel. His wardrobe stared back at him. Dull one-piece leisure suits, uniforms, safety clothes... He sighed again.

As his door chimed he remembered something and reached up.

"Come," he said, without thinking, and pulled down an old sim-leather bag. "No, wait!" he cried, too late.

"Ahem!" said a familiar voice.

Riker froze for a moment, recovered, drew out a pair of jeans and shirt from the bag and dressed swiftly. He turned without (too much) chagrin.

"You wanted to see me, Counselor?" The voice was steady but the blue eyes held the hint of a twinkle.

Deanna collapsed into giggles.

"It wasn't that funny," Riker told her with mock severity, already digging around in the cupboard again. When he finally stood up it was with a pair of very battered sim-leather boots.

"Where," Deanna recovered herself, "did you get those?"

Riker stomped into the last boot.

"I had these clothes synthesized on the Hood. We were taking shore leave during a refit and these - " he indicated the denim, "Have you ever been to Vela IX?" Enthusiasm warmed his voice.

This was how Deanna loved him best. "No - I can't say that I have," she smiled.

"It's beautiful, Deanna. So much of it is like home. One day

I'll take you to see Alaska... You haven't told me what you wanted me for yet," he said thoughtfully.

"Captain Picard has asked to see us in his quarters," Troi replied, a slight frown creasing her brow. "He was blocking me a little, and he didn't say why he wanted us - but he was very unhappy."

"I'd better change." Riker turned.

"No." Troi caught his arm. "I think you'd better come now, Will."

Wes Crusher stopped dead and watched in disbelief as a bundle of red fur streaked by, then stopped suddenly at the curve of the corridor.

The little mongoose-like creature stretched up off its hindquarters, sniffed the air, blinked bulging brown eyes and twitched its whiskers engagingly.

Crusher touched his communicator, and with a squeak it was gone.

"Crusher to Security."

The terrified creature bolted along the corridor at high speed, blinded by fear, and was unaware that it had all but gone full circle. Suddenly it cannoned into what must have felt like a tree trunk.

Lt. Worf stared at the dazed creature lying on his boot. He stooped to remove it, but the little animal let out a blood-curdling shriek at the sight and smell of him and fled.

Worf growled disgustedly and tapped the communicator on his jacket.

Jean-Luc Picard stared blankly at the viewscreen on his desk. If there was one area of command that he truly despised, it was this.

He withdrew the message cartridge and laid it carefully on the desk, the sombre lines of his face deepened by the half-light of his quarters. It was easier and gentler than the cold light of day.

"Damn!" he said softly, rested his elbows on the table and lowered his face into strong, lean hands.

The door chimed. Picard pulled himself up wearily and flexed his shoulders.

"Come," he said in a flat tone.

Riker and Troi did not hide their consternation. For the first time it occurred to Picard that it might have been better to brief the Counselor first, but it was too late now.

"Sit, both of you. Counselor, I have requested your presence

because I have a most unhappy duty to perform. You have not been briefed, because it was my judgement at the time that you were too personally involved." He said it slowly, and now his eyes fixed on Troi's. Her dark eyes widened and the colour drained from her face as they flew to Riker.

"Will." Picard turned to him. "There is no easy way to say this. Kyle Riker is dead."

"How?" It was the Counselor from whom the word was jerked.

"The Bandi have almost completed the new Farpoint station. Kyle Riker went with a group of negotiators to inspect and draw up contracts for the use of the station by Starfleet. There was an explosion at the construction site." Picard turned to his First Officer. "Your father saved Captain Simonesceau's life, shielding her from the concussion - and the shrapnel."

It had helped Picard, to explain it in full, but Troi's troubled gaze was on Riker. She felt no rage, no anguish... only a cold emptiness in him.

He stood alone, shoulders sagging a little in the light blue shirt, unbrushed hair falling into his eyes, and a look of such barrenness in those eyes that she became frightened.

"Will?"

Picard had never experienced a Riker quite like this. He knew that father and son had parted on marginally better terms; he had expected grief... anger... pain, but certainly not this half alive reaction.

"Will?" repeated Deanna.

"Deanna?" Riker seemed to come out of a trance. "I'm sorry. Of course this has come as a shock. I'm sorry you both had to be involved," he said, in a frighteningly normal voice.

"Will, if you need anything..." began Picard, feeling helpless.

"No, sir. I'll be fine. If you will excuse me? There will be details to be taken care of."

Picard handed him the tape silently, allowing, for just a moment, the weight of his hand to rest on Riker's arm.

Reluctantly the blue eyes met the hazel ones. Picard was struck almost physically by the lack of life in them.

"I'll be going... sir," Riker said quietly and withdrew.

When the doors closed Picard came around to the Counselor's chair.

"Is he going to be all right, Deanna?"

"I don't know. I really don't know," she whispered, and fell silent.

"Captain," she said finally. "The man who walked out of here was not the Will Riker I know." Her eyes closed as Picard's strong

fingers closed on her shoulder.

"I know," he said.

Mike Andrews leaped out of the turbolift looking for Wesley Crusher and Worf and cursed as a streak of red fur shot by him and through the closing doors, a hairsbreadth short of being bisected.

The lift had been called to another level. He cursed again and sprinted for the next turbo-shaft.

Geordi La Forge surveyed his assistant's ruined uniform, and the pool of oil on the deck.

"Maraea, go and change. Now."

"Yes, sir." The young Polynesian technician grinned sheepishly.

"And Lieutenant, next time someone asks you to help with their 'pet' project - ignore them!" Geordi added good naturedly, shaking his head over the ugly combustion engine monstrosity in his workshop. It was a replication of a relic from the past, and something he had wanted to explore for a long time.

"Are you sure you won't be needing any more help, sir?" Maraean Hipatea's sing-song voice teased from the direction of the turbo-lift.

"No!" He smacked the manifold meaningfully and got grease all over his hand. It was not supposed to be on there. The only reply was a squeak of surprise from Maraean.

"I was just kidding..." he began, to be interrupted by a red blur.

He watched disbelievingly as the creature leaped from his chair to a console, ran across a row of display panels and out into main engineering, where he was gratified to see Johnson and Tien, the duty technicians, give chase.

Before he could move to help, it had doubled back past the workshop and was headed back toward the lift. Geordi followed. Maraean had gone, which meant the doors were closed. It skidded to a halt.

Piece of cake, he thought smugly.

Johnson dived first, grabbed, but ended up with only handfuls of red hair as he cannoned into the bulkhead. Tien tried to cut it off and lapsed into outraged Vietnamese when it sank needle sharp teeth into his shin.

Oh for a phaser set on stun, thought La Forge, trying not to laugh.

Tien grabbed the beast by the scruff and tore it off his leg, another string of exotic epithets issuing forth at the pain.

Geordi tapped his communicator. Tien had the strongest pair of hands in Engineering. The intruder wasn't going anywhere.

"La Forge to Security. We have a package for you. Bring a cage. Engineering workshop two."

"On my way," growled Worf, his mood not at all promising.

Picard and Troi looked around as one as Will Riker unexpectedly stepped onto the bridge. Troi, frowned as Riker seated himself with a nod of acknowledgement to the Captain, and called for a status report from Wesley Crusher, who had remained uncharacteristically intent on his instruments during the First Officer's arrival.

Troi could feel the boy's sympathy and even pain for the older man, despite the stoic face and the concise, clipped tones of his report. Crusher's eyes met Riker's at the last, and Troi felt first surprise, then uneasiness and fear from the boy.

Wesley opened his mouth to speak, then closed it and turned silently back to his console.

"You were not expected to take this watch, Number One. There must be a great deal for you to attend to."

"With all due respect, Captain, I am exactly where I want to be." The half smile did not reach Riker's eyes.

"Of course." Picard nodded uncomfortably.

Over the Captain's shoulder the First Officer met Troi's velvet gaze. The blue eyes flickered for the barest moment, then were drawn away to the viewscreen.

Unaware of the unhappiness in her face as she watched Riker, Deanna turned to find Picard now watching her with puzzled, troubled features.

At her tiny shake of the head, he too moved his attention to the view-screen.

Data and Worf arrived in Engineering together, only minutes after Geordi's call. Worf went straight to Tien and relieved him of the intruder.

"A minmot," Data told them over the creature's terrified shrieks.

"Lieutenant, perhaps if I...?" Data disengaged the creature's teeth and claws from the Klingon's arm. Immediately the noise ceased.

"Well how 'bout that?" chirped La Forge, his ears still ringing. Worf snorted.

"Many such creatures are incompatible with Klingons," began Data. "For example there was an incident on the first Enterprise involving small, furry creatures called tribbles..."

"Yeah, O.K., Data. Everyone knows that story," interrupted La Forge hastily, glancing surreptitiously at the big Security Chief.

"Let's just get the little guy out of here before I have to start digging furballs out of my instruments."

Data was now nursing the minmot like a cat. In the android's arms, it was as placid and relaxed as a farm tabby. He followed Worf to the turbolift.

"Tien, get that bite looked at in sickbay and call Maraea to take over. I'll be back shortly," La Forge told the injured crewman, and followed the others.

They were met in the science lab by Mike Andrews and, unexpectedly, Captain Picard, whose watch had just ended.

The minmot was dozing in Data's arms, an engagingly peaceful ball of red fur.

"*This is what all of the trouble has been about?*" Picard's hand moved instinctively toward the soft fur.

"No, Captain!"

"Captain, don't!"

"Captain, I would not advi..."

It was too late. Picard swung around with a bloodcurdling roar, the minmot firmly anchored to his index finger. Swiftly, he used thumb and forefinger to squeeze the animal's jaw, so that it was forced to let go.

"Mr. Data!" Picard held out the minmot, now swiping at mid-air and making almost as much noise as it had in Engineering.

Again, as soon as the android took control of the creature it became placid.

Worf's look of outrage turned to one of smugness.

"Dr. Andrews, find a cage for that animal this moment, or beam it back to the planet immediately," ordered Picard, as blood dripped from his finger to the floor. Only then did he notice that Worf's sleeve and hand were matted with the Klingon's blood.

"Mr. Worf, with me to Sickbay. Mr. Data - " Picard moved to gesture with the damaged finger, then snatched it back defensively. "Mr. Data, see that the tests are done with alacrity. I want that animal off my ship!"

The minmot blinked sleepily and buried its head in the crook of Data's arm. Andrews looked mildly insulted, but knew better than to say so just then.

"Yes, sir," Data said, looking down. The minmot had gone back to sleep.

Ten Forward was almost deserted. During routine transits, crew members tended to look for other forms of relaxation, or make their own, rather than seek the comfort of Guinan's lounge.

Guinan carefully fixed a drink in a wide, heavy glass, and

carried it to the farthest corner of the room, where William Riker sat staring at the stars over a glass of plain synthehol.

"Will..." Guinan said gently. "Try this." She set down the glass. If he noticed the change in address, Riker did not show it. He looked somberly from Guinan to the glass.

His lips parted slightly as it went down, and a red tinge came into the tanned cheeks.

"Real?" he rasped. "Where did you get real bourbon?"

Guinan smiled her *that's for me to know* smile.

Riker nodded. "I needed that."

"I know," she said.

The slightest hint of a shiver passed over him as he turned back to the stars. "Thanks," he whispered, almost inaudibly.

"You're welcome."

Guinan melted away, unnoticed.

When Wesley Crusher arrived a few minutes later and made a beeline for the Commander, Guinan got as far as the end of the bar, then stopped.

Her dark, mysterious eyes found Riker, who still sat quietly staring into space. She nodded to herself, turned and went back behind the counter.

"Commander Riker?" Wesley said quietly.

"Wes? Got a problem?" Riker turned, half smiling.

"No... Yes, sir."

"Something your mother can't handle?"

"Mom's busy patching up bites and scratches," Wes replied, more confident on familiar ground.

"Ah. The intruder?"

"Yes, sir."

"O.K. Sit down and tell me about it."

Wesley sat, still confused and unnerved by Riker's impassiveness. It frightened him. Grief, he knew. Pain he understood, but this was beyond his young experience.

"I have this friend..." he began, inevitably.

A corner of Riker's mouth tugged upward. "Wes, I'm all right," he said softly.

"No!" the boy said fiercely. "No you're not. It's all wrong. You can't put grief away like some book you don't want to read!"

Riker found himself surprised by the boy's insight, but unmoved

by the plea. He felt... nothing.

"I know you care, Wes. You just can't help this time. I have to deal with this my own way."

Crusher's lips pressed into a line that might have been anger or hurt. He stood up. "It doesn't go away, you know. No matter how long you wait, it'll still be there," he said in a cool, hard voice, as Riker gazed at him, apparently unmoved.

Guinan watched Wesley go, head up, cheeks flushed with colour. Carefully, she poured another bourbon.

Doctor Crusher surveyed her work. A shirtless Klingon was an impressive sight at any time, but alongside his paler, more diminutive companion, Worf seemed enormous.

Picard was just happy to have kept his jacket on. Crusher turned his hand. The finger was no longer painful and the lacerations were almost healed.

Her concern was for the Klingon, whose wounds refused to respond to conventional treatment.

Picard watched, fascinated, as Crusher resorted to applying a dermoseal to the open wounds as she would for burns.

"Worf, have you any allergies not listed on your medical records?" asked the Doctor unexpectedly.

"None that I am aware of," he told her.

"I'm worried about the inflammation around those bites. There's no infection that my sensors can detect, and yet they just won't heal."

Crusher turned to Picard. "I recommend that Worf be taken off active duty until we know what effect this... 'infection' - if that's what it is - is going to have on him."

"Concur, Doctor," Picard said reluctantly, aware that he wasn't going to get rid of the minmot quite as quickly as he would have hoped.

Worf looked apoplectic. "Captain, I see no reason to -"

"You have one very good reason, Lieutenant: I said so."

"Yes, sir." Worf subsided.

Beverly looked the Klingon square in the eyes and handed him back his jacket. "I am sorry," she said. "Dr. Andrews has provided a lot of samples for analysis. As soon as we know anything I'll let you know."

Worf nodded. "Doctor, what is the condition of Lieutenant Tien's injuries?" he asked.

"About the same as Captain Picard's. Trung's leg was quite severely lacerated, but it responded very well. It's healing beautifully."

Worf looked thoughtful for a while. "This has happened before," he said finally.

"Then why isn't it on your records?" demanded Crusher.

"It did not happen to me," said the Klingon, as if to a child.

He turned pointedly to his Captain. "Somewhere, it is recorded. I have studied Klingon history since before the Age of Inclusion. It has happened before."

"Well, it's a lead," Beverly butted in sourly, looking as though she would give anything to poke her tongue out at the unctuous alien. "Although..." She picked up an instrument. "It is still possible that the answer is in your bloodstream."

Picard watched with amusement as the mighty warrior Worf wavered just a little at the sight of Beverly Crusher's syringe, and then with fascination as it filled with greenish blood.

"Programme complete." The computer's voice seemed a long way away. The First Officer of the Enterprise stepped inside the holodeck and halted as the doors vanished.

The illusion of vast Alaskan wilderness was breathtaking. Even the air was exhilarating. Riker smiled to himself and struck out toward a very realistic river, not in the least surprised to see the big grizzly fishing on rocks in the centre of it. He paused on a grassy bank.

"Computer. I think we can do without the bear. Delete."

The image vanished, leaving the salmon to continue the arduous journey in peace.

Riker surveyed his computer generated paradise. It seemed so real - the warmth of the sun, the bluest of Alaskan skies; the faint zephyr that cooled his cheeks. He closed his heart to the sudden tug from the past and shifted the heavy pack purposefully.

Riker selected a camp site with care. The small tent, a holo-replica of one from his childhood, was erected in minutes.

The design was an antique one. Somehow, Alaska had never quite relinquished its past and neither had her citizens. He built a camp fire and set real coffee on it to heat, its glorious aroma soon mingling with the sharp freshness of an Alaskan summer day.

Defiantly, Riker focused on the beverage, drinking slowly and savouring the richness of flavour. The big hands, clasped about the mug for warmth, trembled, then stilled.

Suddenly the pleasure had gone out of the moment. Jerkily, he tipped out the dregs of his drink, jumped to his feet, gathered the fishing equipment that had spilled out of his pack, and strode toward the stream.

He settled on a tuft of soft grass on the bank and opened a small box. It was not a computer generation. It was old and battered and had a name scratched on it in childish writing. Inside, an array of traditionally tied fishing lures were carefully

laid out.

He chose the oldest, most faded and ragged one in the tray and held it up to the light. For a seemingly endless time the blue eyes stared at the bit of metal and feathers.

Then, suddenly, they lost focus and the big hand clenched, mindless of the razor sharp barbs. Blood trickled between fingers that were rigid with shock.

Deanna Troi halted outside holodeck three. The discovery that Riker had booked the time had been enough to bring her there. Now she hesitated at invading his privacy. Then suddenly she was reeling, the blood drained from her face.

"Computer, entry!" she cried.

Will Riker looked down mindlessly at his hand.

"Bill, let go!" Deanna struggled to pull open the bloody fingers. Numbly, Riker opened his palm, tearing more flesh. In tears, Troi finally pulled it free and threw the wretched thing into the stream.

Riker watched it slowly sink before turning to her with glacial eyes. She felt it then: the resentment, the fear of letting her get too close to his guilt, his pain.

"Bill..." She again reverted to the long forgotten diminutive, but he closed his eyes against it.

Troi sighed, defeated, then swung around at the unexpected sound of the holodeck doors opening again. Captain Picard. Riker was unmoved. She slid quietly away and went to the Captain.

"Your services are required elsewhere, Counselor," Picard told her reproachfully, as she came to a halt before him. "As I see they have been here," he amended, noting the pallor, the ruined make up, and, meeting her eyes, the hurt.

"Bad?" he asked gently.

"I can't help him this time," she said miserably. "Will is feeling more than just grief. All those years of estrangement have left terrible scars. He's afraid that I'll... see... them if I get too close to him."

"He is not a child any more, Counselor. Perhaps privacy is all that is required now?" offered Picard softly.

Deanna shook her head slowly. "Will has spent most of his life having to deal with his own problems - to cope, alone. He doesn't know how to ask for help. If he needed the answer to a complex tactical problem he'd come to you, or Data; or if there were problems with the dependants, he'd come to me, certainly, but when it comes to dealing with his own personal demons, Captain, he will sink or swim alone."

Picard sighed heavily. "What do you suggest?" he asked, watching a figure in the distance. Riker was walking away from the river.

"No recommendations," Deanna said, distancing herself from her job. "He needs a friend." Her eyes searched the hazel ones.

"Commander Riker has many friends aboard..."

"All of whom must continue to work under him as a superior officer," finished Troi, an edge in her voice now.

"You are needed in sickbay, Counselor," Picard said sharply. He watched her start reluctantly for the exit and sighed again with resignation.

"I will call you if I need you," he called softly after her, and watched the tension go out of the small back as the exit reappeared.

Riker was seated on a rock drinking coffee when Picard found him.

"Captain." He rose in greeting.

Picard indicated his surroundings. "It's magnificent, Number One. I've never been to Alaska."

Riker smiled. "There's no place quite like it," he said with pride.

"You grew up here, did you not?" asked Picard, hiding confusion.

"Yes sir. I was born in Yaznez... We had some times..." He smiled again, reminiscently, his mood puzzling Picard still further.

"Is this then an actual place, or a compilation of all the best things about Alaska?" ventured Picard, feeling his way carefully.

For a moment Riker seemed to falter, then gather himself.

"It's real. I used to come here sometimes as a child," he said quietly.

"And your father - did he also love this place?"

"I - " Riker's hand trembled on the empty mug. "I don't know," he admitted.

"I think he must have," Picard said slowly, remembering another parent, "if you came here together."

Riker looked hard at the note of wistfulness in the voice. He cast the mug away.

"We fought just as much here as anywhere else," he said bitterly.

"Then why did you come back?" Picard allowed his voice to harden. Riker responded instinctively to the tone.

"Because there was nowhere else - " he began angrily.

"Wasn't anywhere else... what?" encouraged Picard softly.

Riker seemed to struggle with something for long seconds. Finally, he spoke: "One time I disturbed a bear by the river. I was almost killed. My father was almost killed rescuing me." He paused, ran a hand roughly over his face, continued, "He picked me up and hugged me so hard I thought I would burst... I was just eight years old. He said if I ever did anything like that again I wouldn't sit down for a week," he added with a flicker of a smile. "Then, for the first and only time in my life, he said, "I love you, damn it!" and let me go. He never said it again... until the Ares."

Picard watched him sit down shakily on the boulder again, searched for the right thing to say.

"In his way I believe he loved you very much," he said with conviction. "Will, if it helps, I believe that your father... pushed you away to keep from smothering you. He was a very dynamic individual and you were all he had. All that is fine and strong in you you owe to the fact that he loved you enough to let go. Don't let him undo in death what he gave up so much for, in life."

Riker seemed dazed. "You don't understand," he said in a hollow voice. "I've never told him. Never..." He shook his head, his eyes bright with pain.

"Will - "

"No. You're right," Riker said, and rose to his feet. "This," he gestured at the hologram, "was foolish and indulgent, and a waste of time. It's time I pulled myself together."

A silent Picard followed him across the camp toward the tent.

"Most of this is holographic," Riker was saying, extinguishing the fire out of sheer habit, with his boot.

He saw the small box, thrown carelessly in the grass, as Picard reached his side.

"Except this," he amended, bending forward to pick it up. His boot twisted on a loose rock and he would have fallen, but for the strength of Picard's arm, thrust instantly across his body, and holding him even as the lure box fell back to earth and broke open, spilling its contents everywhere. For a moment there was only silence.

Then there was a small sound and Picard felt Riker's shudder before the big man pulled free.

"I never told him how I felt..." he said, kneeling to gather the flies and slowly put them back in the box.

"How do you feel?" Picard asked the bent head. Riker closed the box.

"I hated him," he said slowly. "He was no father and I was no son!"

"And he hated you?" continued Picard, carefully.

The younger man looked up, stricken. "God, no!" he exclaimed in surprise. Then: "No, of course not... All those years - I never knew, never realized..."

"Realised what, Will?" Picard ignored the tears Riker had at last begun to weep.

"That he was saying it, all along. He really did..."

"Of course he did," Picard said gently. "But you hated him?"

Riker's eyes were closed against the pain. They flew open. "No, I -" he began. The blue eyes widened suddenly in dismay, then anger. "Damn you!" he cried.

"Say it!" Picard shouted back

Riker looked away. "All those YEARS, I hated him for not being there for me... And I was no better than him," he said bitterly.

"Were you? Were you really?" pressed Picard. "Isn't there only one thing that keeps hatred burning so fiercely?"

"No..." protested Riker brokenly.

"Isn't there?... Say it!"

"All right!" The exclamation was torn from him, momentary anger burning in his eyes. "I loved him. I loved him and now he's dead... and I can never tell him." He covered his face with his hands.

Jean-Luc Picard sighed heavily, closing his eyes momentarily against the full tide of Riker's grief. Then briefly he rested a hand in wordless comfort on his friend's shoulder, turned and left without looking back.

Much later, an Alaskan sunset painted itself brilliantly across the evening sky and the lone figure of William Riker finally rose and walked slowly to the exit.

Mike Andrews finished his report just as Data entered his lab.

"Checking up on me?" he asked, not unkindly.

"Those are my orders, Doctor," Data replied.

"For Pete's sake call me Mike!" Andrews knew he shouldn't have said it as soon as it was out.

"Who is Pete?"

"It's a figure of speech, Data. I just don't want you calling me 'Doctor' all the time. There's no 'Pete'," he explained patiently.

"Ah... When can we beam the minmot back to Artemis II?" Data never stayed distracted for long.

"As soon as Bev Crusher solves the problem with Worf's wound."

"Has there been any progress?"

"Some. We've isolated an enzyme in its saliva that has no effect on Human tissue, but effects the Klingon immune response.

The thing is, it seems to have remained localized, not entering the bloodstream at all." Andrews paused, aware that his tongue had got away from him. "It's just a matter of time," he concluded tamely.

"Of course," replied Data, already engrossed in accessing his medical database, and plans to interface with the ship's computer.

Mike Andrews watched him leave, blissfully unaware of the process he'd started.

"Doctor Crusher?"

Beverly Crusher put down her notes will ill temper. "Yes, Data? No. Don't tell me. You want an aspirin, or better yet, an indigestion remedy?" she pondered acidly.

Data paused, utterly confused. "I have been researching the question of Worf's injury," he told her warily.

"Oh?" Her tone was equally wary. Worf had developed a secondary infection which had taken time to control, and which left open the question of the enzyme's effect on his bloodstream. There were dark circles under her eyes and worry lines around her mouth.

"Yes, Doctor," Data continued. "Work has actually been published in this field: a study of the bite of hundreds of species of rodents and small, aggressive mammals known to frequent populous areas in the Federation. Fifteen such species have been found to have enzymes in their saliva analogous to that of the minmot. Three are native to Klingon worlds. There are a number of documented cases, almost identical to Worf's, of Klingons being bitten."

"O.K.," Crusher allowed. "Now tell me why the enzyme is not present in, and wreaking havoc on, Worf's bloodstream?"

"Certainly," replied Data, failing to recognize the warning brittleness in the Doctor's tone, or the fatigue in her striking features, and launched into a creditable medical explanation.

"...they are attacked on entry to the bloodstream by leukocytes containing powerful anti-enzymes and which respond overwhelmingly to foreign organisms," he concluded.

"Excellent," the Doctor said dryly, her mind still processing the new information. "And the cure?"

"I have calculated that in 28.432 hours Worf's arm will begin to heal normally. The enzyme will have passed completely into his bloodstream and been absorbed," Data answered earnestly, oblivious of the sarcasm.

Crusher sat down hard. It had been right under her nose all the time.

Data observed her dejection with a degree of puzzlement. "Have I missed something, Doctor?" he said.

Beverly jumped back up, eyes filled with contrition, and laid a hand on the android's sleeve. "No you haven't, Data. I'm just annoyed with myself for overlooking the obvious in favour of the

exotic. I should have listened to Worf. I'm sorry."

"I was not aware of any need for apology," he told her simply.

"Well, there was," Crusher said crossly. She squeezed his arm and smiled. "Now get out of here so I can write this up and inform Mr. Worf."

The arboretum was at the height of its fall cycle, a chill in the air, the breeze rustling autumn leaves at Deanna Troi's feet.

There had been no word from Picard. Now her watch was over and the tiny forest provided sanctuary, deserted as it was in its least comfortable phase.

The wind whipped the silky dress around her legs and teased the long black tresses. Deanna could hear it whistling in the pines. She wondered if Picard had stayed, and questioned her own decision to withdraw so completely.

"Deanna?" a voice said quietly behind her.

"Hello, Will." She turned. He looked tired. Slowly, the tension went out of her face, and gladness filled her eyes. Riker opened his arms. They moved as one.

"It's cold in here," he told her brusquely, his cheek resting on the dark curls.

"It was." She sighed contentedly.

Data stepped onto the transporter platform with Worf and Geordi La Forge, a 'cage' in his hands. It was actually a plexiglass fronted terrarium, but even the minmot knew it for a cage.

"I fail to understand why the Captain found it necessary to order you to accompany me to the surface," Data looked up at the Klingon. "I am sufficiently capable of performing such a simple task without assistance. And Geordi - "

"Is coming along for the ride, since I was partly to blame for it being here in the first place," grinned the Engineer.

The android lapsed into uncharacteristic silence, his brow furrowed.

La Forge and Worf exchanged looks over his shoulder. There was a gleam in Geordi's eye.

"Data?" he teased. "You aren't sulking, are you?"

"Sulking?" Data straightened. "Certainly not. I do not sulk," he told them, and before Geordi could reply, "Energise, Mr. O'Brien."

Guinan set two glasses on the bar then turned around suddenly. Captain Picard, Deanna Troi and Commander Riker came in. She noted

the casual way Riker answered a question from the Captain and shared a joke with Troi, and smiled to herself.

A few moments later the Commander excused himself from the others and picked his way through to the quiet corner where Wesley Crusher had spread his latest assignment, plus study tapes and portable PADD over a large table.

"Homework?"

Wesley looked up from a sticky problem. "Sort of," he said. "Sometimes I think Data forgets I'm not an android," he grinned, silently absorbing the change in Riker.

Riker turned a chair and straddled it.

"Maybe it's a compliment?" He smiled and sat down.

Wesley considered. "Yeah, maybe," he chuckled, "but I wouldn't mind if he made his compliments a little smaller." He stretched and sat back in his chair, eyeing the older man speculatively.

"Wes," Riker said quietly.

Wesley straightened, met the older man's gaze.

Riker rested his chin on arms folded across the top of his chair.

"Tell me about your father," he said.



A MAN WITH VISION?

by

Michael Simpson

Will Riker turned the V.I.S.O.R. over and over in his hands as he strode swiftly down the Enterprise's corridor towards the transporter room. In appearance it resembled two interlocked combs curved into an arc, a simplistic yet dominating instrument. It had no real aesthetic appeal and provided no subtlety for its wearer. It came with an unwritten guarantee to be the first thing to grab the attention before any other distinguishing features its user might possess, with the possible exception of an extra leg or, Riker thought with a chuckle, *no hair*.

Whatever, it was a definite fact that Geordi La Forge neither wore it for pleasure nor to improve his personal appearance. As a Starfleet cadet its 'benefits' had been offered to the young man and he had accepted the challenge with the enthusiasm that was a hallmark of his character. Geordi La Forge had never shunned a challenge in his life, and if truth were told the biggest one he had ever faced had let him get where he was today, an essential part of the unique team that comprised the bridge crew of the Federation's finest ever flagship.

That experience had not entirely been without pain.

Wearing the V.I.S.O.R. certainly wasn't.

Both challenges had cost the boy, and indeed the man, dearly in terms of emotional stability. Blind people were not altogether uncommon in Starfleet Academy. In fact, since joining the Federation of Planets, the predominant race of the perpetually dark planet Scalopus - a race without eyes at all - had won many places in the institution and all had successfully graduated. For Humans however the phenomenon was unnatural, and it had taken an inordinate length of time just to convince a sceptical society that a lack of vision did not necessarily denote a comparable lack of intelligence, a principle applied equally to those who were deaf and dumb or subject to any number of other so-called 'handicaps'.

Geordi La Forge was fortunate to live in an age when those who held such attitudes were no longer in the majority, but lacking the sensory aids evolution had developed for the citizens of Scalopus, he had inevitably found his way much harder. In times of stress, rare though expected, a certain element of pigheaded stubbornness (a family trait) had helped him through when enthusiasm's guiding spirit had grown weary. Whilst Starfleet Academy itself practised no prejudice towards people like him, in the cold, hard light of the leisure hours when those who could have been closer friends were drawn away by the stimuli received and transmitted by their additional facility, self consciousness, and rarely - very, very rarely - when the V.I.S.O.R. - induced headaches had become overwhelming, self pity dampened his Human spirit.

'C&fe "t51-b% H'. ('Vision is but a different translation of the language of light!')

Not directly translatable into Standard, the Scalopsian phrase was inscribed on a plaque that hung now in the Junior Grade Lieutenant's quarters, presented as a momento to him by his closest friend at the Academy, herself a Scalopsian.

Qqeq-on-qo was how she had spelled her name, though its pronunciation had sounded quite different from what one might expect. Pronunciation was, after all, a way of life for the members of that culture. Speech was the way by which all communication was practised. Not just by words either, but pronunciations, phrases and sentences, all with specific unique meanings, more complex than any Human could hope to appreciate, if only because they did not have the necessarily developed sensory organs to define the 'sounds' that were the Scalopsian words. So her name was a sound that had taken Geordi months to learn before attaining the required level of perfection. Months in which any other Human might have fallen in love with a friend and helper of such dedication!

Geordi La Forge never could have, though.

From the very first day he had seen her, to him another anonymous cadet, he knew the location of all the thermal pastures of her internal structure, where red blood flowed through all of her veins and pumped through the arteries of her steadily pulsating heart.

He saw parts of her that no man would ever wish to see of his wife. The size of her brain, the shape of her bones, the contraction of the muscles every time she made the slightest movement. All this thanks to a device the powers of which even the scientists did not then fully understand.

He knew he could never allow himself to love this person.

Anyone else might have found it tragically humorous, but not the boy La Forge, doomed for all time to see people as if they were subjects on an anatomy wallchart.

Which is why he could never wear that device when visiting his family or when presented with any of the other things he valued spiritually.

Perhaps that was why he found the android so easy to have as a friend. Maybe, in a thoughtless sort of way, he subconsciously considered seeing inside Data was in a way no different from analysing the operation of the Enterprise's warp engine flow sensors.

Perhaps, he was occasionally inclined to ponder, that was why he felt such wonder at understanding that other 'translation of the language of light' which, at Q's discretion, permitted him the 'sight' of Natasha Yar.

Such were the pains aside from headaches that Geordi La Forge learned to live with and control through the benefits of the instrument that kept his white eyes from public view. Perhaps one day a better understanding of its operating relationship with the nerve endings that relayed its images and messages to the brain would be reached - a brain that took time itself to adapt to this manufactured alien language - an understanding that gave the man a unique privilege and all the just rewards his trials as the guinea pig of the Starfleet scientists deserved. Privileges that, during his off duty hours, permitted him to lie on his officer's bed in his

officer's quarters, relaxing in the relief of a prescription that calmed his pounding head, feeling proud that his heart and his spirit, if not his eyes, saw what the world was really about.

As he strode beneath, beside and beyond the myriad coloured lights of the starship's corridor, barely noticing but one of them, a man occasionally blinded by sight pondered all of this, the Lieutenant's record and the parts of it he did not know.

The hurt and sadness no written account would or could convey.

What had the loss of Qqeeq-on-qo, Geordi's own personal philosopher, meant to him when she had returned to her home world and he continued in his? How must it hurt him to know every day that the only way he could ever 'see' anything in the world was as if it were a specimen, asking himself in each case would he rather not have seen it at all?

What manner of nightmares bombarded his reason in times of sleep, when those of seeing men could be frightening enough?

If there was one philosophy of the Scalopsians Geordi had understood well, it was that 'for the most beautiful things to be appreciated fully, the vision of the imagination is no less efficient or acceptable than that of sight. Beauty, after all, in all its diverse forms, is not something seen, rather something sensed!'

No, William Riker thought, turning the V.I.S.O.R. over again, Geordi La Forge has accepted its challenges through no kind of superficial ego. And, perhaps most thankfully for the scientists, his determinedly humane spirit has ensured that the true inspiration had not diminished.

The abrupt swish of the transporter room doors disturbed Riker's introspection. *Funny, he thought, that lost in such thoughts I should have found it quite subconsciously.* As he entered, the familiar fuzzy tinkle-hum of the matter-to-energy-to-matter device was fading, to reveal the form of the man who had been so deeply occupying his thoughts during his short journey here. The matter-of-fact way he accepted the device and clipped its terminals to the receptors in his temples, every bit the officer, made the Commander wonder if his emotive thoughts were fitting to a man of his years and position.

STORMY RIDE

by

Ann E Routley

"Captain's Log, Stardate 42530.2

The Enterprise is in orbit around the planet of Chautara in the Beta Selsey IV system. Our current assignment - to convey a royal delegation from Chautara to Starbase 68 for the occasion of Chautara's official acceptance into full membership of the Federation. In line with Starfleet tradition, two shuttlecraft have been dispatched to the planet's surface and we await their return."

Captain Jean-Luc Picard closed the console on the arm of his command chair and turned to Counselor Troi, seated to his left.

"It will be a pleasure to see the Princess again, do you not think, Counselor?"

"It certainly will, sir," Deanna smiled.

"You have met Chautara's Princess before?" The question came from the ship's new Chief Medical Officer, Kate Pulaski, who was seated next to Deanna.

"Ah, Doctor - of course, you were not aboard the Enterprise the last time we visited Chautara." Picard rose, and gave a sharp tug to the tunic of his Starfleet uniform. "Excuse me, ladies, but I am due on Holodeck 6. Perhaps you would be so good as to bring the Doctor up to date, Counselor?"

"Certainly, sir." Deanna's dark, Betazoid eyes followed the Captain as he strode up the ramp.

"You have the helm, Mister La Forge," said the Captain over his shoulder as he entered the turbolift.

"Aye, sir." Chief Engineer Geordi La Forge pushed aside the console of the con station, and walked over to the centre of the bridge. He seated himself in the Captain's chair and one of the engineering ensigns slipped unobtrusively into the seat he had just vacated.

Geordi half turned as Deanna began to speak. "Princess Anneia is lucky to be alive, Katherine. She was on a diplomatic mission to Starbase 68 to apply for Federation membership for Chautara, when she was captured by the Ferengi. They destroyed her star cruiser, along with her entire crew, and would have held her ransom to obtain the vast mineral resources in which Chautara is rich."

Deanna paused, the memory of Anneia's pain and distress when she had first been brought aboard the Enterprise still vivid in her mind.

"And...?" prompted Pulaski.

"And along came the cavalry!" drawled Geordi with a grin. "Captain Picard negotiated a deal with the Ferengi, who weren't about to risk their ship against the superior fire power of the Enterprise."

"We conveyed the Princess to her home planet - Chautara." Deanna indicated the viewscreen. "And we've been waiting for the announcement of the official ceremony."

Geordi clapped his hands together and rubbed them. "I for one am looking forward to the celebrations! I seem to remember the Princess made quite an impression on the Enterprise." He leaned forward conspiratorially. "Especially on the Old Burrhog!" Deanna tried to look disapproving of Geordi's less-than-respectful manner of referring to his Captain, but she had to laugh. Yes, Princess Anneia had spread warmth and goodwill amongst all of them, and it would be good to see her again. If this were a general trait of the Chautaran race, having a sizeable delegation aboard the Enterprise would make her own job that much easier and more pleasant.

"Sir!" From behind the command centre, the urgent voice of the ensign on duty at Tactical cut into their reveries. "Sensors show considerable disturbance on the planet's surface - right around the capital city." Geordi shot to his feet and wheeled to face him.

"Disturbance?"

"Looks like a severe electrical storm, sir."

"Open a channel," said Geordi. "Enterprise to shuttlecraft. Come in, please." A pause.

"No response, sir. The storm must be interfering with their communications."

"Damn," said Geordi under his breath.

Lieutenant Commander Data brought the shuttlecraft into the landing bay, and shut down the engines. He looked across at the other craft and raised a hand to O'Brien who was piloting her.

"Some storm, Data," commented Riker. "Will we be able to take off again?"

"I do not see why not, Commander." The android turned as First Officer Riker and the Klingon Security Chief Worf unfolded themselves from their cramped seats and stood, Riker's hand instinctively reaching up to the ceiling to protect his head. "The shuttlecraft have been through a lot worse in the Starfleet simulators."

"Yes, but they weren't carrying the royal family and entourage of a Federation-elect planet at the time," reminded Riker.

"Speaking of whom..." came Worf's basso profundo, and Riker smiled broadly as he saw a group approaching the shuttlecraft. Pulling down the tunic of his dress uniform, and looking round to check that the others were ready, Riker activated the exit, and the three men climbed down into the landing bay and moved to stand with

O'Brien and the two Security men who had just vacated the other craft.

Flanked by six guards in ceremonial robes, Princess Anneia approached the landing party. Her face was radiant, and as she recognised the members of the Enterprise crew, her pace quickened.

"Commander Riker!" Extending both hands she clasped Riker's in her own, and brought them up to her lips. He repeated the warm welcome, and smiled into her upturned face. "How wonderful it is to see you all again!" Turning, she took the android's hands in her own. "Data - my friend."

Eager to emulate the gallant Riker, Data lifted Anneia's right hand to his lips. A loud and peculiar sucking noise ensued, and Data looked up in some consternation at Riker, who quickly suppressed the grin that had creased his features, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Come," said the Princess brightly, to cover Data's discomfiture. "You must meet Father. We will not be able to take off until this storm passes." As if on cue, a tremendous flash of lightning lit up the landing bay, followed by a deafening clap of thunder. Linking arms with Data and signalling to her entourage, Anneia led the party to the exit.

Jean-Luc Picard checked the girth on his chestnut mount, and then swung himself into the saddle. He let the horse walk, then trot in a wide circle, riding the trot with the practised gait of one who knew what he was doing. Then as he kicked gently with his heels, the horse went into a lolloping canter. Picard leant forward and patted the horse's neck, and let out a deep sigh of satisfaction. He marvelled once again at the technology that made the Enterprise's holodeck programmes possible.

Pulling the reins to the left, Picard angled in and levelled the horse at the first jump. He let the horse find its own pace, and as the beast bunched up his hind quarters and left the ground, Picard leaned forward, his hands instinctively grabbing a handful of mane in with the reins. They made a perfect landing, and Picard swung the animal around to face the next jump. They sailed over this, and as they slowed to a trot, Picard reined in.

"Computer - raise the jumps by half a metre."

"Inadvisable," came the synthesized, female voice.

"Inadvisable?" queried the Captain. "Explain."

"Safety interface inoperational."

Picard let out an exasperated sigh. It would take best part of his recreational period to re-programme the holodeck controls. He surveyed the arena. He was familiar with this course; familiar with his mount. Confident of his abilities as a horseman, Picard repeated his order.

"Inadvisable," the bland voice persisted.

"I don't want your advice, damn it. Just do it." Picard watched as the jumps adjusted, and then began to canter around the

perimeter of the ring again.

The doors of the turbolift whooshed open, and Deanna Troi emerged into the corridor, bound for her private quarters. She smiled as she recognised the young ensign coming towards her.

"Hello, Wesley."

"Hello, Counselor. I was just going to the Bridge. Do you think the Captain would let me use Science Station Three for a while?"

"The Captain isn't on the Bridge at the moment, Wesley. I believe he's taking recreation on Holodeck Six."

"Holodeck Six? Well, I hope it's nothing dangerous. Worf's been at the safety interface again." Wesley laughed. "He considers it against his Klingon honour to fight opponents who are incapable of killing him." The boy entered the turbolift. "He'll be OK as long as he's strolling through one of his parks, or sitting in that French cafe he likes so much."

Wesley waved as the doors hissed shut, but Deanna didn't move. What sort of recreation had the Captain been planning? She searched her memory. Had he told her? Deanna wheeled around and set off down the corridor towards Holodeck Six. It would be as well to check - to warn the Captain.

King P'lek stood and surveyed those grouped around him. "Well, gentlemen, if you are refreshed, I think we can begin our journey." He looked out of the viewport. "These storms look bad, but rarely do any real damage."

"Bark worse than their bite," offered Riker. Data's head cocked to one side. "Dogs, Data," said Riker, by way of explanation. The expression on Data's face indicated that he was none the wiser for this last piece of information.

"Dogs, Commander? I fail to see the significance."

"An expression, Data - forget it."

"Ah, I see, sir. A metaphor involving domestic animals. A colloquialism commonly used on Earth, as in 'raining cats and dogs', 'quiet as a mouse', 'blind as a bat', 'bald as a -'"

"Data!"

Anneia, watching this exchange with amusement, turned to the King. "Father, with your permission..."

"Yes, my dear?"

"I think it would be best if we travelled separately."

"A wise precaution, Anneia. If this is agreeable to our honoured friends?" He smiled warmly at Riker.

"Of course, Your Majesty. As you say, a wise precaution."

"Good. Shall we go, then?"

Deanna activated the door to Holodeck Six and stepped inside. She took in the scene in seconds - the green turf fenced around, the jumps laid out, and some metres away, the Captain astride his favourite mount, cantering towards the first of the jumps. As he took the first jump, Deanna gasped as she saw the steep angle at which the horse had to take off. His back hoofs just caught the top rail, and it fell. Deanna heard the clipped "Merde!", and saw the grim determination in his eyes as Picard set the animal towards the next - even higher - jump.

"Captain - wait!" Deanna shouted, and started towards him. Picard's concentration wavered, and he looked across at the approaching figure of the Counselor. But already the horse was in mid-air. Picard flung himself forward, but the horse sensed his uncertainty, and faltered. Legs flailing, the horse crashed chest-first into the posts. Deanna screamed, and ran forward, but was powerless to avert what she could see was happening. As if in slow-motion Picard was flung over the horse's shoulder, and crashed into the turf with a sickening thud. With a stab of fear Picard realised that the holodeck had done nothing to soften his landing, and as he rolled over he saw the dark shape of the horse bearing down on him. The last thing Jean-Luc remembered was Deanna's shrill "NO!", and then his head exploded with pain and everything went black.

Princess Anneia took the seat behind Data, and looked up at Worf as he adjusted her safety straps.

"I do hope Father will be all right," she said, looking across the landing bay to where the other shuttle stood ready for take-off. "It must be two decades since he engaged in space travel."

"Two decades? How so?" quizzed Riker.

Anneia's face took on a troubled expression, and she replied, "Mother died in space." She didn't elaborate, and Riker made a mental note to have a quiet word with ship's Counselor, Deanna Troi, when they arrived on the Enterprise.

"O'Brien will take care of him, Highness," said Worf.

Riker sealed the exit. "OK, Data - let's get this show on the road."

"Show, Commander?" Data turned, his face again showing a puzzled expression; and Anneia, pulled from her reflections, laughed. Riker clapped Data on the shoulder. "Let's get back to the Enterprise, my friend. At the double. We've got a party to go to." He smiled round at the others, did up his own safety straps, and they all jerked backwards as the engines kicked in, and the shuttle moved toward the exit.

Kate Pulaski looked up from the unconscious form of the Captain as Deanna entered.

"How is he, Doctor?"

"He'll be fine, Deanna - a couple of broken ribs, and a humdinger of a concussion." She walked over to her desk and sat down at the compscreen. "What I can't understand," she said, looking up at the Counselor with ill-concealed annoyance, "is how anyone could be injured this badly on a holodeck. Dammit, they're supposed to be designed to cushion you."

Deanna coloured slightly. She would say nothing; it would only incriminate Lieutenant Worf.

"Has anyone told Commander Riker?"

"We've lost communication with the shuttles - some sort of electrical storm on the planet," explained Deanna.

"Machines!" said Pulaski, in exasperation. "They're all the same."

A groan came from under the diagnostic canopy, and both women moved quickly over to Picard's side.

"Shuttle Two to bridge." Miles O'Brien's voice came over the comlink, and Geordi instinctively looked up.

"La Forge here. What's going on down there, Mister O'Brien?"

"We're clear of the planet, Chief, but we've lost the others."

"Lost them? What d'you mean - lost them?"

"We both took off from the planet OK, but then we hit the storm. Our shuttle pulled clear, but Shuttle One was taking a real buffeting; it looks like they had to make a forced landing. I would have gone down after them, but we have the King on board."

"Quite right, Miles." Geordi frowned and rubbed his chin. "Call me when you're safely docked and we'll work out how we're gonna get them back. La Forge out."

Geordi stood stiffly, looking up at the viewscreen before him. He turned as he felt a soft touch on his arm.

"They're all right, Geordi." Although his VISOR was unable to discern the look in the lovely Betazoid eyes, Deanna's warmth and encouragement were almost tangible, and Geordi visibly relaxed. "They're not hurt," she said gently. "And as soon as the storm dies down, they'll be with us. Even if the shuttle's damaged, we can beam them home."

They stood, their shoulders touching, looking out at the image of Chautara floating in the black expanse of space.

Anneia gave up trying to sleep. Despite the fire that Worf had lit using his phaser, she was bitterly cold and the damp night air seemed to be eating into her bones. She shifted position for the dozenth time and then sat up with a deep sigh, pulling her thin cloak around her. She looked around at the Starfleet officers,

wondering which of them she might ask to share their rug - and their own warmth - with her.

Commander Riker was curled up not far away, his back to her. Some innate shyness prevented her from approaching him. She looked beyond him to where Worf sat dozing, his back against a rock. Worf had scorned any sort of covering, and Anneia could not imagine the massive Klingon's reaction if she were to ask him to keep her warm. The security man, Brownlow, was crouching a little way off, but he was busy taking readings on his tricorder. They had decided to leave the shuttlecraft rather than sleep there, since on this barren part of the planet's surface where they had made a crash-landing, the shuttle was the only object in the vicinity in danger of conducting the lightning that was still illuminating the sky at regular intervals.

Anneia pulled her cloak tighter round her shoulders and shivered violently. A couple of metres away, Data suddenly sat upright.

"You are uncomfortable, Princess Anneia?"

"Ssshhh!" she said, crawling over beside him. "You'll wake the others."

Data lowered his vocal level. "Can I be of assistance?" he inquired.

"I'm so cold, Data. May I sit close to you?"

"Of course, Princess. If we use your cloak, and I raise my thermal level a few degrees, your own body temperature should rise accordingly."

"Thank you, Data," she said, grateful for his matter-of-factness. Anneia moved closer then paused, a little embarrassed, but the android took the girl in his arms and lay down, pulling her cloak over them both. Anneia was initially surprised by the sheer solidness of Data's body, and she lay stiffly for some minutes, her teeth chattering with the cold. Gradually, though, she felt a comforting warmth seep into her, and she began to relax. Nestling closer, she sighed sleepily and murmured her thanks; her arm circled Data's chest, and came to rest in the small of his back.

A memory stirred in Data, and his features furrowed slightly.

"Do you wish me to be... intimate?"

"Hmmmm?" came the sleepy response.

"I am programmed for intimacy, your Highness."

Anneia lifted her head from Data's chest in surprise and looked into his face. His opalescent, golden eyes gleamed in the dying firelight. She smiled. "No, Data. I do not wish you to be intimate. Just warm."

His gaze was unblinking, and Anneia fought down an urge to laugh and hug him tight for his utter straightforwardness. Instead, she met his gaze and said softly, "How wonderful to be so childlike."

Data's head tilted to one side, and his face took on an

expression as near wistful as Anneia had ever seen on the gentle android. "You are not the first to make that observation," he said. Anneia opened her mouth to speak, but saw Data's eyes take on the glazed look that meant he was accessing information. "Tasha said... that I see things with the wonder of a child." He smiled to himself.

"Tasha? Oh - of course, Lt. Yar. Your Chief of Security. I had hoped that Tasha might have been included in the landing party."

"Tasha," Data said simply, "is dead."

Anneia caught her breath. "Dead?"

Quietly, and without apparent emotion, Data told the Princess of the incident on Vagra II when Tasha had lost her life defending the others from the sadistic Armus.

"I'm so sorry, Data."

"Sorry? Ah - you feel I must be grieving." Data smiled at her. "I cannot feel grief as Humans do. But I must admit to a sense of great - emptiness - when Tasha died. She was my friend. We had been... intimate."

"Oh." There was nothing else she could say. Anneia saw again the wistful look on Data's features. She lowered her head onto his chest again, and Data pulled the rug up around her shoulders and held her close.

"I know, Ensign. Just keep trying, OK?" Geordi turned as he heard the turbolift doors open, and his face broke into a broad grin.

"Hey, Captain! Good to see you, sir."

"Status, Mister La Forge?" Picard walked stiffly down the ramp and eased himself into his command chair, wincing as he did so. Deanna turned reproachful dark eyes on him, but Picard met them with steely grey ones, willing her to say nothing.

"Still no communication with Shuttle One, Captain," replied La Forge. "Storm seems to be dying down, though, according to our sensors. Should be able to re-establish links pretty soon and get 'em up here, one way or another, sir."

"Good. Carry on, Mister La Forge." Picard opened the console on the arm of his chair and began updating his log entry. Pausing, he turned to Deanna. "I think that King P'lek would benefit from a visit, Counselor. It was quite an alarming journey for him."

"Not only that, sir; for the second time in not so many weeks his daughter Anneia is missing, possibly in danger. I will endeavour to reassure him, Captain." She rose.

"Make it so, Counselor." Picard flicked the switch on the log recorder and continued.

Commander Riker sat bolt upright as the familiar sound

chittered from the Starfleet insignia on his chest. Tapping it lightly with his fingers, he said eagerly, "Riker to Enterprise."

"Ah, Number One - good to hear you. Is everyone safe?"

Riker grinned, and ran a hand through his tousled hair. "Affirmative, Captain. But the shuttle's a write-off."

"No matter, Commander. We'll beam you out of there."

"Could you just give us five minutes to get organised, sir?"

"Certainly, Number One. Picard out."

Riker looked round at the others. Worf was already on his feet, adjusting the heavy Klingon sash across his chest. Brownlow raised himself on his elbows, blinked and yawned widely. Data sat up carefully, still cradling the Princess. Riker raised his eyebrows, then smiled as Anneia looked at him, her cheeks colouring slightly.

"Rise and shine," said Riker, brightly. "Beam-up's in five minutes."

"Four minutes, 37 seconds, to be pre..." began Data, then stopped as Worf glowered at him.

"Thank you, Data," chorused Riker and Worf together.

Applause and cheers rang out as Admiral Quinn took his seat, having delivered his speech of welcome. From her place at the semicircular table on the dais Princess Anneia surveyed the vast Assembly Hall of the Starbase, and then turned to look at her father the King, flanked by Admiral Quinn and Captain Picard, nodding his thanks.

King P'lek rose to speak, and Anneia watched him with pride. They had written the speech together, and she had helped him learn and rehearse it over and again in his quarters on the Enterprise on the way to Starbase 68. As the speech progressed Anneia's mind wandered back over the events that had led up to Chautara's alliance with the United Federation of Planets, and an involuntarily shudder went through her as she recalled her ordeal at the hands of the Ferengi. She was still lost in thought when there was another burst of applause, and she realised that the formal part of the ceremony was over.

"Princess Anneia?" She felt a gentle hand on her shoulder, and turned to find Jean-Luc Picard at her side. Anneia smiled up at him warmly and rose, taking the arm he proffered. Together, they followed Admiral Quinn and the King as they left the dais and processed up the centre aisle of the Assembly Hall.

"You seem... thoughtful; contemplative," said the Captain quietly, nodding as he did so to the applauding Starfleet personnel assembled on either side of the aisle.

"I was thinking what it cost to bring us to this place," she said. "The longed-for alliance with the Federation. It's been a stormy ride."

They were entering the dining room, and Picard led the way to the top table where the Royal party, Starfleet executives and Picard's own ranking officers stood chatting amongst themselves.

"In my experience," he said softly, his hand closing over hers and squeezing it gently, "very little of any lasting value comes without sacrifice and struggle." She stopped, and looked up at him, and Jean-Luc was struck again by the curious blend of innocence and pain in the elfin face turned up towards his, a hint of tears glistening in her eyes.

"Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which like the toad, ugly and venomous
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.....
..... I would not change it."

They stood looking at each other. Anneia looked suddenly fragile and vulnerable, and Picard was seized with the desire to make their excuses and escort her from this large and noisy gathering.

"'As You Like It', I believe, Captain."

Picard snapped round at the sound of Data's bright, distinctive tenor, to find the android officer holding a chair ready for the Princess. "Earth's famous Bard, William Shakespeare," he said, seeing Anneia's questioning look. "Act two, scene one, lines"

"Thank you, Mister Data," said Picard with emphasis. Really, Data's capacity for social bricks was legendary.

But the spell was broken, and Anneia laughed, her mirth dispelling her painful reveries. Seating herself, she smiled across at her father, and all around the banqueting hall, the assembled guests followed her lead and took their seats. King P'lek rose to give thanks, and the banquet commenced.

FUN ON ANGEL ONE

"Deanna, look at this they've brought for Will to wear.
Come on, say something - don't just stand and stare!"

"Oh Tasha, he'll look so cute, really sweet and dear.
They've even brought the jewel to place upon his ear."

"I'm longing to see his reaction, I wonder what he'll do?"

"I'm longing to see him in it, I'll fall down laughing,
won't you?"

"Now quiet, I sense him coming; this shall be such fun."

"I'm dying to see him dressed as a man from Angel One!"

EYES

Golden eyes met hazel eyes
 in Tasha's quarters.
 Words were whispered:
 "What I need from you, Data
 - is gentleness and joy."
 Eyes closed with pleasure.

Hazel eyes met golden eyes
 at Tactical station.
 Words were whispered:
 "I'll say this once, Data
 - it never happened."
 Eyes averted with embarrassment.

Golden eyes met closed eyes
 in Sick Bay.
 Words were whispered:
 "80 ... 85 ... 90 ... I'm sorry, Data
 - she's gone."
 Eyes wide with disbelief.

Hazel eyes met golden eyes
 on the Holodeck.
 Words were whispered:
 "You see things with a child's eyes, Data
 - my dear friend."
 Eyes filled with love.

Ann E Routley

(3rd prize in Poetry Competition, UFP Con '91)

WESLEY

"The boy," grunts Worf.
 "The boy," says Picard.
 "The boy," echoes Riker -
 Those words will drive me mad.

"Young Wesley," say the adults.
 "The brains trust," my peers have said.
 It's not my fault the answers
 Just pop into my head!

Helen Connor



C I N I D H

by

Gail Christison

Robert DeSoto and William Riker strolled into the transporter room of the U.S.S. Hood still engrossed in an amicable disagreement about the wisdom of Riker's choice of holiday destination.

Riker had picked up the Hood at a Starbase and relied on his former Captain's goodwill to get to the relatively unknown system which had been charted, and was on the Hood's way to its next assignment - and Rob DeSoto was a good friend.

The planet Bremah was a small blue world with a single satellite, reminiscent of Earth - from a distance. Although it had a good share of life-supporting land mass it was predominantly oceanic. It had not produced, however, any known sentient life forms; two scientists, a marine exobiologist and a botanist, were the only known inhabitants.

Shimeon and Liane Steadman were friends from a more carefree time in Riker's life. Shimeon - Sam - had once been a serving Starfleet Officer and a shipmate. Liane had made an unexpected third during an extended shore leave on Earth, and had eventually fallen for the calmer, more relaxed Steadman, despite an initial attraction to the taller, broader and much more intense Riker.

Liane Ozawa had found the pair on a beach in the Hawaiian Islands very early one morning as she was making her way to a whale monitoring station. The return of the humpback whale to Terran Oceans had been painstakingly handled and guided to its present population levels. The first female - and then later her female calf - carried not only their own ova to term but also the cryogenically preserved embryos of other humpbacks, thereby broadening the genetic pool. Seventy-five years, however, was still precious little time in terms of whale repopulation. It meant that every means, electronic and otherwise, had to be employed to track and record every movement of the few small pods that roamed the open ocean.

Liane had been a very young, newly graduated marine biologist, and easily talked into taking the worst shifts. Finding two rather crumpled male bodies on an otherwise deserted stretch of early morning beach was not what the slender young Hawaiian had in mind as she wandered along the sand watching the dawn. Only Riker's innate charm and Steadman's calm had prevented them both from being nastily incapacitated as they rose in front of her like spectres.

Riker had spoken first. "I surrender," he had told the girl facing him with a terrified but ferocious expression on her lovely face and her arms raised menacingly. Steadman had stayed silent, regarding her with sleepy eyes. "My name is Bill Riker, and this is Sam Steadman. We didn't mean to frighten you. We stopped to sit and listen to the surf. We must have fallen asleep."

"Hard night?" Liane had looked up at him sceptically.

"Wrong schedule," he'd said ruefully.

"Schedule? You're Starfleet?"

Steadman bowed. "Your typical future Captain type - " he indicated Riker - "and your humble Science Officer," he told her with a crooked grin.

Liane had looked from Riker, whose hair was a boyish, sand riddled disaster, falling into his eyes and sticking up everywhere, to the shorter, thicker-set Steadman whose eyes still weren't completely open, and had started to laugh. "C'mon, you look like you could use some coffee," she'd relented, her long black hair blowing in the sea breeze as she led the way, still laughing, down the beach.

It had been the beginning of a long friendship, one that had survived the eventual marriage of Sam and Liane, transfers, promotions and time itself.

Will Riker grinned at his former commander from the transporter platform. "What more could you want? Endless deserted beaches, peace, tranquillity, virgin forest to explore and good friends."

DeSoto shook his head. "A good time," he said drily.

"Which will be had by all. I'll let you know how good when the Enterprise picks me up in three weeks time."

"Oh, you'll have a wonderful time," DeSoto drawled as he ambled out. "Don't complain to me if all you get is sunburn and poison ivy. I warned you."

The echo of Riker's laughter followed him as the Transporter Chief obediently beamed the Enterprise Officer to the encampment below.

Riker blinked at the brilliant sunshine and looked around just in time to catch the slim brown body hurling itself at him.

"Liane!" he laughed and swung her around. "You look good," he said, lowering her gently to her feet.

"So do you. Better than ever, Gorgeous."

Riker made a face and looked over her shoulder. His friend had lost a great deal of hair and gained a little weight, but there was that placid, reassuring brown gaze and the crooked grin.

"Hello, Sam," he said, dropping an arm around Liane. "It's been too long."

"You're telling us?" Sam thrust out his hand. "We've been following your career. Liane's very fond of ships named Enterprise."

Riker looked puzzled for a moment. "Of course," he said finally, smiling again. "The whales! Well, she's a very different Enterprise now, but her Captain is every bit as brilliant and unique. I haven't come to talk shop, though." He looked down at Liane. "I came to catch up."

"We're glad you did, Bill. You're right, it's been too damn long, and besides, Liane and I have just about had enough of the same routine day in, day out."

Liane made a face. "Don't listen to him. If he had his way we'd never go back to civilization. He loves this place. Wait until you see his fishing camp. Then you'll know that he's not going anywhere."

"Or wasn't, until these tremors started," Sam corrected. "I'm no geologist but I absolutely don't like shakers."

"Are they dangerous?" Riker became serious.

"Nah, they come in cycles. They also seem to be seasonal, but they always level out and decline in intensity before they get really serious. We've been here three years and they've only been noticeable during the last eighteen months."

"Sam, don't you have any seismic equipment here at all?"

"Now what would a botanist do with that stuff? I wouldn't even be able to set it up. Y'know: insert flap A into slot B and find 4 brass screws for twelve holes... We started off as a full scale scientific expedition, with eighteen scientists and support staff. By the time the bean counters at the Federation Research Institute had finished with our application for a grant all we had left was what you see."

"We had to come, Bill," Liane began, then paused at the bemused expression on his face, a question in her honey coloured eyes.

"Nobody has called me that for a very long time," he told her.

"But I thought only your father called you Will?" Sam said, puzzled.

"Used to be, but ever since the Hood people have taken to calling me that. Even Deanna. I don't mind anymore."

Liane smiled. "Good. I like it. I always have. How is Deanna?"

"As beautiful as ever. She is very happy on the Enterprise and we are good friends."

"Just good friends?" asked Sam drily.

"Just good - very good - friends. The Enterprise has been good for both of us."

"Leave him alone, Shimeon. Come and see where you'll be spending most of the next four weeks, Will, before he starts on the rest of your love life."

The two men laughed and followed her along the edge of the sand hills to the impressive survival habitat that was a cross between a six room transportable home and a modular tent. "I'm impressed," Riker told Liane as they reached the door.

"It's good for a force ten hurricane, force eight 'quake and anything in between - or your money back," cracked the botanist.

Riker looked about unabashedly when they stepped inside. It was designed to replicate the shape and feel of a real home, yet be versatile enough to be moved, manually if necessary, at any time.

The doorway led straight into the living area, off which was the galley and a short hallway leading to the lab, storeroom, the sleeping quarters and the ablutions. Sam pointed to the control box on the wall near the door. "That's the baby that does the trick, the same as our old survival domes. This stuff is like paper when it's packed; even lighter than the old stuff, but when it's assembled and programmed the individual panels become whatever you need them to be: anything from the tensile strength of parsteel to the flexibility of any number of polymers. They can be transparent like the windows over there or opaque, or anything in between. We just change them to suit the conditions."

"Like I said," Riker said, dropping into a freeform lounge chair and moving around until it moulded itself around his considerable person, "I'm impressed."

They talked long into the night about old times and old friends, and gradually moved on to the recent past and the many changes in all their lives. Liane watched the men talk and was amused by the familiarity of their behaviour. Bill - Will - still managed to say and reveal precious little about his feelings or himself, yet managed to share the intimacy of the evening, making them laugh and telling long exaggerated versions of his more colourful adventures, while Sam listened contentedly and made the occasional crack, or told the odd tale of his own. In a way it was as if the years were never between them.

Riker felt contentment steal around him like a warm blanket. After the Borg incursion the pressure on him to accept promotion had been almost oppressive. Even Jean-Luc Picard had unwittingly added subtle weight to the argument for his advancement. It left little room for relaxation, despite his declared intention to make his own decisions in his own time. He sighed.

Sam paused in his tall fish tale and looked at his friend. "Bed?"

"Uh? Oh, sorry Sam. I've never heard the truth stretched so many different ways before." He smiled. "I was thinking about the future and the difference between what I want and what everyone else thinks I want."

Shimeon seemed to understand the obscure remark and nodded soberly. "Don't let it get you down. Just remember that mere Humans can't read minds. You gave out a certain set of signals for a long time, and just because you've changed course - " he tapped his temple - "doesn't mean they automatically know about it too."

Riker smiled. "Still as wise as ever," he said and turned to Liane, who was curled up in a chair with an antique volume of poetry. "I think I'll turn in now. My schedule is almost in line with yours but it'll take a few more days to even out."

"We partitioned off part of the lab for you. It's the biggest room in the place and there's not that much equipment in it. The Hood left us a bunk for you, size extra long, and the synthesizer worked overtime to make bedclothes that you couldn't complain

about," Liane scolded good naturedly.

"You still haven't forgotten that." Riker laughed softly. "It wasn't my fault that someone didn't book ahead and the only room left in the place was a double with a camp bed," he said, staring straight at Steadman.

"I can still see you the next morning," Sam laughed, "feet hanging over one end, head and shoulders hanging over the other and the covers in the middle. You walked like a duck with a broken a... "

"Sam!" Liane scolded.

"For two days," he finished sedately.

"Good night," Riker said emphatically and grinned tiredly. "I'll find my own way."

Liane watched him go. "He's not happy, Shimeon. It'll age him, all the pressure."

"Don't worry, love. B... Will thrives on pressure. Somehow, the Enterprise has managed to get an even tighter grip on him than the career he was always bustin' for. He'll work it out eventually. I think he's found something he's been searching for all his life and doesn't realise it yet."

Liane frowned. "You always seem to know him better than he knows himself - and better than his father ever did."

"You don't often find a friend who fits like a glove the way we do, only without the strings. We fit one another like that... he understands me too, always has. I haven't told Will, but I know Kyle too, since we worked on the lythia plant contracts with Girax IX together. He's been a lonely man. A big chunk of him's been missing since Will was a little boy and neither of them realise it. It's made Will a little hard, especially on himself."

"Until now," Liane said, understanding. "He's mellowed, and he's calmer, even if he is unhappy."

"Ships named Enterprise..." Shimeon mused sleepily.

"Bed," declared his wife. He opened one eye speculatively. "Sleep," she added. He closed it again.

Bremah's yellow sun rose serenely over a tranquil ocean. As Will Riker wandered up the beach only the subdued roar of the surf and the occasional screech of a seabird ruffled the morning calm. He had taken great pleasure in doing nothing more than pulling a comb through his rebellious hair and donning a pair of denim shorts from the synthesizer before slipping out to watch the sunrise. The knowledge that he was one of only three people on the entire world and that no-one was depending his next word, or move, somehow brought a peace that he had not known since his junior officer days. He smiled to himself and kicked sand up into the breeze for the hell of it, then broke into an easy jog until he reached the headland.

It was a steep but uncomplicated climb to the bluff. For a

long time he sat up on its grassy crest watching the waves. Birds fished, the occasional fish jumped and always the waves came toward the shore, curling lazily onto the sand or breaking over the volcanic rocks at the base of the bluff and its surrounds. The Enterprise seemed almost another reality, somewhere, sometime, but nowhere near now.

He closed his eyes and rested his head on arms folded across his raised knees. His life had changed from the moment he materialised on the transporter platform of the Enterprise and was welcomed aboard by a very young Tasha Yar. Then it was just a new job... Now? Now it seemed as though leaving would cost him a part of himself, a part that had taken so long to find that he couldn't yet bear to let it go. Not taking the Drake had been a career move, but the others...

He straightened and looked out to sea, deliberately casting the thought aside. He squinted. There were now many vees in the water of the bay between his bluff and the camp. A giant body speared upward from the emerald waters and breached, a spectacle of rose and cream coloured cetacea such as Riker had never seen in his life. He had never been fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time to observe Earth's few humpbacks during their yearly migrations, nor had he had the time on other planets for such things. He moved quickly down to the beach again, almost too quickly, tripping several times over half buried volcanic rock during his decent. The bay was deep, open to the ocean and dropping sharply away from about the twenty foot mark.

The great beasts had come fearlessly close to the beach and Riker revelled in their magnificence. Life never ceased to amaze him. To the big man no living creature, small or large, was less than a wonder, but these beautiful whale-like creatures were unlike anything he had encountered before. A mother and calf came in very close to shore, drifting along the trough where the breakers rose to roll in to the beach, both laid over on their sides, surprisingly large glistening black eyes moving as he moved, watching him as he watched them.

He smiled, wondered wistfully if these were beings as the Humpbacks were discovered to be, or just beautiful creatures of the sea. The Humpbacks had been as eager as the Humans to ensure the rebirth of their species, helping to accomplish gynaecological miracles impossible to have achieved without the communication established by one Vulcan, and continued by many more specialist Vulcan healers and scientists, all as eager, in their own way, to help secure the survival of an endangered but magnificent race.

He toyed with the idea of racing back to rouse the others, but in keeping with his temporary freedom he chose to follow his first impulse. He swam in long, powerful strokes, easily pulling through the water. The cetacea watched, unconcerned, still drifting lazily back and forth in the rising swells. Riker punched through the first breaking waves and spat water, continued through the set of four until he was within metres of the giant creatures. He stopped and trod water, his eyes taking in every detail, from their orca like heads to the smallish dorsal fin and the way the deep rose pink shaded to a creamy white underbelly. They were even more streamlined than orcas and larger by a third, but it was the double lidded eye that drew him, its lazy observation of him almost intelligent in its look.

Slowly, he began to sidestroke gently toward them, trying to



R.P.M.

maintain eye contact and to keep the rest of the pod as much in his peripheral vision as possible. As gently as he approached, the calf slid back behind its parent, neither straightening nor hurrying. Riker was not afraid, nor was he concerned by the distance he saw that they had drifted from the shore when he looked over his shoulder. He was now several hundred metres from the beach, but he was a strong swimmer.

He stopped again within touching distance of the unmoved female. The calf, over half the size of its parent, drifted back out again, seemingly unafraid. Suddenly Riker longed for the ability of a Betazoid or a Vulcan. Instead he stretched out a closed palm and carefully opened his fingers, a universal hominid gesture of peace, and wondered if he weren't being foolish as the great eye blinked and resumed its interested observation.

As he tried to think of a way to communicate, Riker's mind filled with other life forms, other first contacts, some wondrous, some terrifying and all, for him, a joy to encounter, to contact and to understand. He wanted more than anything to reach out and stroke the glistening pink skin but he resisted the temptation, choosing instead to drift with her, and when the calf began to dive and swim around them joined it, diving deep into the cold water and racing headlong back to the surface, and air. Sometimes he followed, sometimes he led. The calf clearly revelled in the play and often came so close that Riker could feel the tip of its tail brush against his legs, or the heady rush of water as it passed him at speed. During one such pass Riker turned the wrong way and was winded as the big tail, pulled not quite quickly enough, slammed into his solar plexus. Instinctively, he rolled onto his back and floated awkwardly, trying to regain his breath. The big female was unmoved, but the calf hovered agitatedly, eventually creeping in to touch his arm with its beak.

"It's all right," he said when he could speak. "It was my fault." He had spoken out of instinct but the calf had stopped, its jet eye fixed on him. It flicked to the big female, then back to Riker, the drooping lids suddenly widening again.

Riker began to tread water. It had touched him. With a brief glance at the female and a fervent prayer that she understand that he meant only friendship, he slowly reached out and brushed the great head with his fingers. The youngster, far from being afraid, drifted closer, allowing Riker to lay a strong hand on its back.

"Hello," the Human said softly.

It moved forward slowly, so that Riker's hand slid gently along its back to the thick dorsal fin.

"What?" Riker asked it when it didn't move any further. It blew impatiently, the smell momentarily overpowering. Riker closed his hand over the fin and immediately felt it pull. He stopped treading water and allowed himself to be towed.

Faster and faster they went, the speed increasing with the Human's exhilaration, around and through the other adults, down along the surf line and back to the female waiting patiently for an end to their antics. Riker let go as the youngster slewed to a halt near its mother.

He was hungry and beginning to tire. He stopped and trod water before her. "Thank you," he said softly and turned to the calf

lolling almost at his elbow. He smiled. "And thank you," he told it, touched the rose coloured nose and turned for the shore. The calf accompanied him to the edge of the surf line and watched as he plunged through several rollers then caught a breaking wave and body surfed almost to the shallows.

The moment Riker was able to touch bottom he stood up and turned to look for it, but the pod was moving out to sea, only a few huge rose coloured backs visible cutting through the water, the occasional rise and fall of others noted by their v-shaped wake. He was inexplicably disappointed. He walked thoughtfully up the beach and jogged back to the camp where the unmistakeable aroma of breakfast greeted him.

Over flapjacks and real coffee, eggs and a very fine imitation of Virginia ham, Riker described his early morning adventure.

"And they let you?" Liane said disbelievingly when he finished.

Riker nodded and swallowed another fork full of flapjacks. "Something wrong with that?"

"Only that they've never let me even into the shallows without turning and heading out to sea. What did you do that I didn't? What did they sense about you, that they didn't find in me?"

"A lack of urgency?" Riker suggested. "I don't have your professional drive to find out what makes them tick."

"Maybe," said Liane thoughtfully, "but I think its more than that."

Riker leaned forward. "What do you know about them, Li? Are they sentient, or are they animals?"

"I don't know. I've documented their movements ever since I arrived, and recorded their speech, but I've never made anything like the contact you did this morning. What did you sense?"

"Only that they were aware of me, and that the calf knew when I was hurt - and maybe that the mother knew that I was going to be all right. Certainly she knew I meant no harm to the calf. Actually, it wasn't really a baby, although it was certainly her child. I would say it was well over half-grown, and at least half the mass of its parent."

Liane nodded. "An adolescent, possibly almost a mature youth. They stay with the mother until she delivers another calf, sometimes even helping with it, baby-sitting when the parent needs to feed and then leaving when they feel the time is right, to join another pod. I envy you, William," she said wistfully. "You've done something I've been dreaming about for three years. Still, this afternoon I'll show you what marine biology is really all about. You can help me out in the lab."

"Doing what?" Riker looked at her suspiciously over his coffee mug.

"Counting the plankton in a drop of sea water," she said impishly. "Manually."

"What's wrong with using a tricorder?" he complained.

"My tricorder will tell you numbers, but it doesn't note variety, shape or coloration. It also tells you only what you ask for. It doesn't tell you, for example, that the water is full of fish larvae, or coral spawn or any number of other important organisms, if you ask it to tell you about plankton. Some of us don't have access to the latest technology and equipment."

"Give the guy a break," Sam chimed in. "He's supposed to be having a holiday."

"Speaking of holidays, when are you two going up to the deep hole?" Liane changed the subject.

Riker turned and looked with equal interest at Steadman, who put down his coffee and looked back at the pair. "I thought you were going with us?"

Liane shook her head. "I have too much to do here. Now that the pod is back I'll go ahead and set up the sound equipment again. Besides, you'll be too busy for anything but chasing tigermouth and silvertop."

Steadman turned to a bemused Riker. "You still a keen fisherman?"

He nodded. "I indulge a few fantasies in the holodeck on the Enterprise, but I haven't been near anything serious for years."

"We'll go the day after tomorrow, if the weather holds. The summer here is fairly Mediterranean, but it occasionally pulls a few tricks. The larger water to land ratio lends a few surprises weather-wise."

"I'll bet," Riker agreed with the certainty of experience. "Now tell me about tigermouth?"

"Beautiful fish, grows up to a metre long, pale green scales shading to iridescent lemon. A pelagic with the whitest, smoothest flesh - and jaws like a five hundred pound Bengal tiger. You absolutely don't want to go looking for your hook until the fish is practically in the pan."

"And the 'hole'?"

"That's what we call it. About twenty miles north of here there's a place where the sea has worn its way into the cliffs. It's so deep there because of the erosion that ocean going fish follow the schools right in. The rocks there support vegetation and shellfish that provide feeding grounds for hundreds of species of small fish and fingerlings. That's how we found it in the first place. While Liane was working on the cataloguing and finding out exactly what each variety was eating I was doing a little research of my own."

"Riker nodded, grinning. "Whatever happened to botany?" he teased.

"Oh you'd be surprised what I've learned about this place. The All-Terrain' is a horror to spend any length of time in, but it's damned useful for getting into and out of tricky areas. My data base on the vegetation here is growing all the time, but I promised myself a vacation while you're here, and besides we try to support each other. If Liane has a project going I stick around. If not,

she'll go with me on another expedition. When there's only two of us and one All-Terrain' it doesn't pay to take too many chances. I mean, it's not as if we can call for help here and get it, you know."

"Oh, I know," Riker agreed ruefully. "I had to find a way to get here, remember?"

Steadman laughed. "There are compensations," he said. "Come on, I'll take you out in the launch."

The launch turned out to be a compact but solid all-purpose runabout with scientific equipment bolted anywhere and everywhere on its deck and in the cockpit. It was sleekly built and was powered by a tiny hydrofusion marine engine.

Once clear of the surf Sam gleefully opened the throttles right up and they planed at an exhilarating speed across the waves. Riker inhaled the spray and enjoyed the feel of the wind raking through his hair. All the while though, his blue eyes were scanning the horizon and the expanse of turquoise sea for the rose pink spirits who had shared his early morning idyll. He told himself that the sense of belonging he felt with them was wishful thinking and that the gentle creatures had seen him as little more than a glorified seal. He frowned. It had not been like that at all!

Soon he was at the controls and guiding the craft out past the two tiny offshore islands, prudently enquiring about shoals and other hazards at the top of his lungs over the sound of the boat pounding through the waves. The creatures were not there.

Disappointed, he handed the craft back to Sam and enjoyed the scenery. A colony of creatures, possibly an analog of Terran seals but more like furry penguins, hopped in their scores to the rocks and dived into the swells.

"Sharks?"

"Not around here, but there are some beauties. Actually Terran sharks all have cartilage but no bones. These guys may look as terrifying as our sharks but they aren't even an analog. The closest thing to one of these babies is a barracuda, but it's hardly a fair comparison. They grow to about thirty five feet and weigh up to three tonnes. I've never seen a live one, only remains washed up on a beach, but Liane's migration tracking recorders pick them up all the time following the pods of cetacea and attacking schools of woollies."

"Woollies?"

"Y'know, the little fuzzballs back there. Liane catalogued them under some fancy scientific name that denotes species, habitat and subcategory, but to me they're woollies."

"Woollies," Riker repeated, remembering the look of the funny little creatures as they herded to the rocks, a sea of ginger fur and big brown eyes, as the boat passed within a dozen metres of the colony, weaving its way through rock shelves in a way that gave Riker more pause than any alien attack on the Enterprise ever had.

Sam guided the boat into clear water and turned her toward the

beach. It was a much smoother trip back, with the waves instead of against them.

Riker spent the afternoon going over all of Liane Steadman's records of the beautiful cetacea she called Shysandh. When asked why Shysandh, Liane had looked bemused.

"I don't know," she told him. "It was driving me crazy, trying to think of a name for them. After all, there is no written or spoken language on this world and I despise scientists who always use Terran referents for alien flora and fauna. Then, one morning I woke up and I knew that they were called the Shysandh. I knew. Anyway, it's the name on the records now."

Riker looked thoughtful. "Li, was the pod in the bay at the time?"

Liane nodded and searched his face. "Will, what's going on in that tiny mind of yours?"

"I'll tell you when I know myself," he grinned and pulled a long black tress. "Now, about those Northern migratory routes..."

"You weren't kidding about this thing, were you?" Riker complained, rubbing his neck as he extricated himself from the All-Terrain'.

Steadman laughed. "We were lucky to get it. Originally the full party was going to have a flitter, but when the grant was turned down we had to take what we could get. We paid for this baby," he said feelingly, patting the chunky little six wheeler.

"Why did you come? No grant, no back up. It's a helluva way to make a living, Sam."

"For Liane. It's her project. She's wanted this for so long. Not Bremah in particular, but just to explore, to be the first. She never had that, following me around on boring Starfleet advisory assignments. And when the Institute turned us down it broke her heart."

Riker nodded and looked around them. They were parked on a tiny bit of weed covered sand in the midst of an expanse of tessellated rock strewn with boulders and the flotsam and jetsam of any number of lifetimes worth of storms. Nearer the deep, inky green waters there were many rock pools and shellfish-encrusted rocks. A few seabirds, their shapes as familiar as their individual features were strange, floated near the rock shelf waiting for the schools of fry that came in with the tide to feed on the plants and crustaceans that formed their own microcosm in the harsh rocky environment.

The cliffs rose out of the water, gouged and mutilated by millenia of pounding by the relentless seas, making a spectacular backdrop for Steadman's rocky cove. The pair unloaded supplies - though not many, because of Steadman's cache. As they climbed steadily to the mysterious holiday retreat there were more pockets of sand, and many plants miraculously growing in crevices and holes in the cliff walls.

"A cave?" Riker turned to his friend.

"It was. I remodelled," grinned Sam. "Best thing about these sea caves is the lack of nasties. Too far from their natural habitat."

Inside the cave mouth was a durasteel door. "Do I have to ask?" drawled Riker as Steadman activated it.

"Present from the Constellation. They dropped in about twelve months ago. Great guy, their First Officer. When he saw the conditions we had to work under he went out of his way to help out, while their Chief Engineer was doing whatever it was that he had to do up there."

"Amio Rul is going to make a fine Captain one day," Riker agreed.

"Anyway, he came fishing here with me, and in the process had this door put in. This used to be just a shelter for Liane and me, with sleeping bags, food and all the fishing tackle we could carry. Thanks to Rul it's a home away from home now."

"I can understand that. His people have been linked to the sea throughout the course of their evolution. It means as much to them as the land used to mean to people on Earth. I bet he had a great time."

"Yeah. Caught a few monsters, and lost a few. Mostly though, he just kind of communed. Like you said, he just seemed to find something spiritual in being back by the water again."

They dumped their supplies on the matted floor and Riker studied the structure - for that was what it was - he was in. A prism within a huge cavern. Using the same principle as the survival domes, they had indeed made a home away from home.

"It looks like a down-market apartment in San Francisco," he teased. "What's behind the rear wall?"

"Some sort of passage."

"Didn't you explore it before you sealed it off?"

"If I wanted to go crawling around in dark holes I would've stayed in Starfleet. I don't want to know what's back there. I feel infinitely safer pretending it's not even there."

Riker shook his head in disbelief. He was also a little annoyed at his old friend. True, it was probably just one of many fissures caused by air pockets when the whole escarpment had been spewed up as molten rock, wended its way to the ocean and cooled, but it could as easily have been an access for anything living in its depths. He dismissed the feeling. There was not enough time for them to fall out over something that was a fait accompli anyway.

They spent a pleasant afternoon not catching anything and losing a great deal of tackle.

"Tigermouths," muttered Sam. "In the big box there's some heavy traces."

Riker brought out two innocuous looking traces and held them up. "These?"

"That's the ones. They may not look like much but you couldn't cut through them with a carbon steel blade."

The very next time Riker hooked something he knew he had a fight on his hands. Between the effort of keeping the strain on the line and reeling in any slack given by the fish he was forced to move back and forth along the rock shelf, following the zigzag movements of his line to reduce the risk of the fish fouling it on any of the submerged outcrops or sawing it off on the paradoxically razor sharp edges of the water worn rock shelf. The struggle continued for twenty minutes, Sam abandoning his own rod to help land the catch.

When it finally showed colour Riker's exhilaration doubled. The iridescent colours were even more spectacular than he had imagined and the long, deadly looking jaw just as ferocious. It had fought hard and exhausted itself. Within a few minutes Riker had brought it to the shelf. Sam reached out to grab the line with a gloved hand.

"No!" Riker shouted.

Steadman snatched his hand back and watched his friend land it alone. The tigermouth was at least a 20kg specimen. Riker looked down at it flapping halfheartedly on the rocks and felt a curious satisfaction, mixed with regret.

The hook had embedded itself in the fish's upper jaw and was removed very carefully by Riker himself with a pair of pliers from the tackle box. Then he gently slid a hand under a large, flared gill.

"Careful," Sam warned, "he looks done in but he could take your hand off if he got hold of it."

Riker lifted the fish, which barely protested, with both hands, moved forward and hunkered down at the water's edge. He laid it gently in the water and watched it float there on its side for a full minute, only mouth and gills moving. He was about to reach out to move the fish to get water through its gills when it gave a mighty thrash of its tail and was gone, leaving little more than a ripple on the water.

"Would've been tough anyway," grumbled Sam, mock sufferingly.

"You'll survive," Riker shot back.

"I'd rather catch something."

He did. Between them they hooked up eleven times and landed seven of them. The only one they kept was the last, which was Riker's. The five kilogram tigermouth was proclaimed by his companion to be the perfect meal-sized catch.

With the sun obscured by the cliffs and the light poor they retired to the cave for the evening. The meal proved to be something close to heaven for Riker, used to synthesized food and synthehol beverages. The fish, cooked beautifully by Steadman, the fresh vegetables courtesy of the last supply ship, and afterward, the real oranges left by the Constellation and the magically

produced bottle of cognac to finish it all off made a mellow end to a great day.

Several more followed, with Riker occasionally choosing to explore instead of fish, but still having a ball. Gone was the tension, the worry. He was browner, leaner and the circles had gone from under his eyes. Back was the youthful enthusiasm, the itch to know what was on the other side of the hill, the gleam in the blue eyes.

On the eighth night they argued late into the night about an unimportant political question concerning some obscure world and enjoyed themselves thoroughly. The lateness of the hour combined with the glow from the cognac saw Riker still well and truly out of it when Steadman rose at daybreak. He had looked at his friend, hair sticking up in all directions, beard overgrown and bedclothes everywhere, sleeping like a child, and was well pleased. Bill Riker had lost something as Cmdr. Will Riker, with his new beard, new uniform and new reserve. Here was the man he and Liane both remembered and called friend.

Sam made a quiet breakfast and stole out to get an early start on a good tide. On the way down to the hole he stopped as the ground began to tremble. It soon quietened again. *Hell of a wake up call, Bill boy*, he smiled to himself and continued on his way. Twice more the ground trembled.

The fish were off the bite. Finally, as the sun lifted above the watery horizon brilliant and warm, he decided to take a break and go back to tease Riker about the shakers. It was quiet as he climbed toward the cave. Eerily quiet. He paused about twenty feet from the opening to look around, unsettled by the silence.

Out of nothing the ground began to shudder again, and then shake with violent force. Loose rubble from higher up began to shower down on him, forcing Steadman back down to the sea. Still the roar went on. Then he heard it. A cracking retort, like rock splitting, then a nightmarish kind of thunder - the sound of the ground tearing apart.

Steadman looked up. It was not an avalanche. It was a collapse. An elliptical gap was left where the cavern had been.

"Nooo!!" he cried as the trembling died away. He ran back up the path, scrambling over debris and boulders to get to the cave mouth. He was breathless and in pain by the time he reached it.

He'd left the door open but where the entrance should have been there was now only rubble and giant slabs of ancient igneous rock.

For almost an hour, at first continually, then periodically, he called to Riker, willing him to answer, but there was only silence. Every second of that time he spent digging frantically, dragging away rock and debris as fast as humanly possible. He was desperately aware that he was barely making a dent in the rubble, but he kept on, fuelled by a growing anger at himself as the realisation sank in that he might have been able to reach his friend had he bothered to explore the cave and found out where it led.

It was midday before the botanist would let himself rest, exhausted, torn and bloodied from digging and grief stricken. He simply stopped, and sat down hard in the dirt, too exhausted to think, too numb to feel and too bereft for tears. When he was able

to function again he rose and began the climb down to the 'All-Terrain'. He would go back and get Liane and his heaviest digging equipment and come back. He would try the communicator, he told himself, purposefully ignoring the odds against any of it being successful..

He was floating, suspended in a netherworld of serenity and calm. He did not question his existence. Neither did he wonder about past or future - only now. He was secure, protected, loved.

Her name was Cinidh. She was a warm, tender, healing presence, holding, comforting, loving him. Sometimes they talked for hours about anything and everything; somehow concepts communicated themselves as easily as a smile or a nod. At other times they just drifted silently together, entwined and unhindered by time or space.

Mostly Riker slept, secure and content until her quicksilver presence would return to be with him again. Always, though, her love surrounded him, a warm healing capsule protecting him from something he knew was waiting, yet each time he reached for it, it moved further away.

As he grew stronger and rested less, they began to journey. Riker marvelled at the sights, the brilliant blue skies, the strange starred nights, and the astounding expanse of ocean. The colours, the myriad of life teeming in its depths enthralled him, from the tiny iridescent plankton and the little blue fish sheltering in soft, amethyst coloured corals, to the strange giant serpent-like ribbon sharks winding their way through the water like five metre banners fluttering in the breeze.

Always, Riker felt Cinidh next to him, a presence, a companion in the strange cavalcade of his thoughts. She was with him as they raced through the waters, free to stop, turn, race, spiral, plunge, or just surface lazily to look at the sky or watch sea birds circle overhead. He exhilarated in the freedom, the joy of it, calling Cinidh to follow, to ask a thousand questions about anything and everything, and feel the ripple of her amusement at his childish enthusiasm.

He stopped to watch a great pod of Shysandh pass, the great rose coloured bodies seemingly unaware of his presence as they drifted by on all sides. He looked for the mother and calf but there was no feeling of recognition and no way of knowing if they had gone by or not. He sighed heavily. Then Cinidh was calling him back. Sleep, she told him gently.

He slept.

Shimeon Steadman cursed his beloved vehicle for its slowness as it lumbered back down toward the camp. He had done the trip in record, bone jarring time, but it still seemed an eternity. He ran into the house looking for Liane. It was empty.

He began loading tools and a rope and oxygen and medical supplies. Still no Liane. He ran to the synthesizer and demanded explosives. It refused, programmed to produce nothing detrimental to Human life. He swore and asked it for more powerful equipment and was told it couldn't be produced in under three days, the

computer warning as always of the time delay in such complicated reproductions.

Sam went to find Liane, calling as he ran. Liane came up from the sand hills, wearing only her swimsuit and a pleased grin which faded as she became aware of his urgency.

"The shaker?" she asked quietly when he stopped.

He nodded, breathing heavily. "Must've been centred not far from the hole. Liane, Bill - "

"Will," she corrected mechanically, all colour drained from her face.

"Will's still in the cave. It collapsed. There's too much debris. Come back with me. I've packed the AT."

She started to move. He grabbed her arm urgently. "Anything on the subspace?" he demanded.

She shook her head miserably. "Not a peep. There isn't supposed to be anything until the freighter comes. I could send out a distress signal - "

"Do it," Sam ordered. "Then meet me at the AT. I've gotta get food, water and blankets."

Liane looked at him for a moment with hopeless eyes. They both knew that if there had been any real hope Sam would have stayed there.

"Come on, love. There's always a chance. Always the possibility that he's only knocked out, or that the whole thing didn't just come down flat. That's very hard rock up there. It may split under pressure but it won't crumble completely into rubble."

She nodded as they moved. "Oh Sam," she sobbed, and ran ahead to the comm unit.

It was the longest sleep of all. Riker wakened slowly, somehow unfocussed and lost this time. He called to Cinidh, but his lips barely moved. They felt dry and stuck together. His eyes would not function properly. He opened them slowly, feeling them filled with dried, sticky sleep and as he did so, felt them also fill with grit.

His disorientation lasted until he realised he was still in bed. Gradually things began to make some sort of sense. He could see little in the dimness, but he was able to pick out the remains of the galley under one boulder and the end of Sam's bed protruding from another. The rest was crushed under tonnes of rock. The roof had come down in enormous slabs of volcanic rock, some crushing everything below, others falling at angles, ends up in the air, or crossed over another slab so that there were pockets among the debris.

He had survived in a pocket. He felt the weight on his legs, but still no pain. He twisted to see what it was and saw that the foot of the bed had collapsed under the weight of several hefty boulders, any one of which might have broken bones. His legs were pinned. He put a hand up to run his fingers nervously through his

hair and found that it was all stuck together. He scraped at it but it was too dark to be able to identify the residue in his palm. Tentatively he tasted it. Blood.

His mind began to focus. Sam... where was Sam? Not in the bed.

"Sss.." The cry died on his lips. His throat was parched. Thirst and hunger were overpowering and he was weak and confused, but he tried to free his legs. It was surprisingly easy. Gradually things began to make sense. He had slept through a 'quake. It was the only explanation. The front of the cave had completely collapsed, as had Sam's rear wall, a great long slab speared through it. The air was fetid and close around him but there was a coldness about his feet. Riker flexed his limbs stiffly and shook them until they hurt. Trying to stand was the biggest shock. He swayed and everything began to spin rapidly. He closed his eyes and sat down, thrusting his head between his knees.

On the fourth attempt he took two or three stooped, shuffling steps toward what was left of the rear wall, following the cold air, then stopped exhausted and waited until his head cleared. Then he took a few more and a few more until he found a gap, and clean air.

Rather than stoop he sat for a while on the chilly stone, breathing lungfuls of sharp, cold sea air. His thoughts turned again to Sam. Where was he? Was he dead? He wasn't in bed, which meant he'd been awake when the tremor hit, yet he hadn't warned Riker. He sighed. It could only mean that Sam was outside when it hit.

He seized on that hope and rose again, bent almost double to move through the fissure.

For five days Liane watched Steadman battle the rockfall, working alongside him, digging, carrying, praying.. It took them until then to reach the first giant slab of volcanic rock, speared sideways across the room.

There was no going on. Small pockets ran into more boulders and larger ones were blocked by slabs of the ancient rock. For long hours the pair had tried to find a way through, and failed. Bereft, they had sat in silence at the mouth of the cave, unable to grasp the reality of the tragedy. They sat apart, each unable or unwilling to accept comfort from the other.

Finally, Shimeon broke the silence. "Liane, there's one other thing I can try. People have survived... babies have survived up to two weeks in collapsed buildings after an earthquake. I want to take the launch up the coast along the cliffs. There's got to be another way in. You couldn't do something to your tricorder to get it to locate cavities in the cliffs?"

A pale Liane turned and raised reddened eyes to his. "How?" she said unhappily. "I only know how to ask it about fish."

"But you do program it for various lifeforms..?"

"I could do that. I could program it specifically for tidal organisms that can only prosper in low light."

Sam looked hopeful. "It might work. I'll have to find the navigation gear and make some rope so we don't end up hopelessly lost in the caves."

"Shimeon," whispered Liane, "do you really think that he could still be alive?"

Steadman looked deeply into his wife's ravaged eyes. "I really do. I wouldn't lie to you now. We both knew we had next to no chance of making it through this way, but we had to try. I might never find the right tunnel - there may not be a right tunnel - but... We'll be back at the camp by nightfall. I'll have everything ready to leave at daybreak. This isn't finished yet."

The darkness was oppressive and claustrophobic. Riker slowed to a crawl, literally, moving carefully on his hands and knees, feeling his way along. His hands suffered badly from the rocks and soon he began to wonder if he had made the right choice. Perhaps the fissure went nowhere. He stopped and tried to stand, found that he could stretch to full height, put a hand up in search of the roof and found none.

With a protective hand raised and outstretched Riker continued, still feeling the cold air on his face, and fancied that the tang of the sea had grown stronger.

His head began to ache and his legs to throb. He seemed to have walked miles without seeing even a flicker of light. He faltered for a moment, suddenly lost without the presence that had been with him in his dreams.

Cinidh! He found his thoughts calling her name. "Cinidh," he said aloud, as if hearing it might make her real.

He trudged on until he was hit by a gust of damp air. He moved eagerly toward it and found rock with his hand. A swift exploration up, down, left and right confirmed that there were two tunnels.

He sat down. His headache was worse and he was much weaker than when he woke in the cave. He was angry. Angry that he had to choose... angry that he was alone again... He stood up and found the left one, took a half a dozen defiant paces down it before being seized by the sure knowledge that he must take the other one.

He started back, feeling the left wall as he went. When it ran out he followed the rock around to the left until he found the other tunnel. The sensory deprivation was taking its toll. Riker began to long for a voice, a shaft of light, anything to pierce the shroud that enveloped him. He walked on, still able to stand upright, still with a hand thrust out. Minutes dragged into hours. He was about to sit down again to rest when he saw it.

It was nothing more than a dull glow but Riker let out a wild yell and laughed. By the time he reached it and was able to see that it was an opening to a huge cavern, sobs were intermixed with the laughter.

Inside the cavern he slowly calmed down and felt the terrible backlash of subsiding adrenalin. He sat, exhausted. It was a sea cave, hewn from the rock by time and tide. The little light there was came from the point where the water flowed in. Riker sat high

up above the tide line, marked by the tidal flora and shellfish that abounded on the rocks, watching the waves flood in and recede. A new set of variables to get through.

How far could he swim in his condition? What was his condition? Where was this place? Would there be anywhere to swim to? How fierce were the tides here?

Only the light gave him comfort. In all the years Riker had known what it felt like to be alone, he had never felt so lonely. He thought not about the danger, or the solitude, but about his dreams.

He smiled to himself as he remembered. Then suddenly he lost what little colour he had left. *Were all his ideal companions to be illusions, like Minuet?* Was he a fool? Worse, was the memory of Cinidh the result of concussion? Was he lucid, or dreaming, or half-mad?

He could not think straight. He put a harried hand to his brow and felt the fever in it.

"Damn!" He scrambled to his feet and came to the water's edge. It was deep, even without the tidal surge. He could not see the bottom in the inky depths. He bent and trailed a hand in it, then both, scooping up water and washing his face, his filthy hair and his battered feet, swearing as everything - but *everything* - began to sting. Still, the cool, clean water felt wonderful. It also redoubled his thirst and reminded him that he was starved.

He was staring into the rippling waters at the centre of the pool when a huge shape rose from the depths. It came from a long way down, ill defined and dark in the poor light. Then suddenly it was on the surface. The calf.

"Hello," Riker said in an emotion-filled voice. "How did you know?"

He slid into the water and went to it, touched it, as if to convince himself that he really was no longer alone. He shed the old-style navy t-shirt he was wearing and turned to his friend.

"Time to go," he said softly and gently ran a hand along the hard, smooth back to the dorsal fin. "It's up to you. Just remember that I can't hold my breath forever," he told it with a flash of his old sense of humour.

The calf didn't move. Riker waited and wondered. He frowned. The calf had come in extraordinarily deep, yet there was light coming in where the water seemed to come from.

He let go, gliding slowly over to the far wall, took a deep breath and dived. There was an exit about half a metre below the water line, a narrow crack that plunged down out of sight. It would fit no more than two Humans abreast. He surfaced.

"I get it," he told the calf. "I have to get out on my own."

At this the calf began to sink, then ever so slowly rotated downward until only its magnificent fluke could be seen disappearing into the murky depths.

Riker ignored his complaining body and followed, exiting easily

through the crack. He surfaced in brilliant sunshine and exhaled in it, plunging through the relatively gentle rollers to the calmer sea, laughter again welling up in him. He slapped the water out of pure joy then jumped when his friend unexpectedly surfaced alongside of him. Along the coast as far as he could see were rocky, jagged cliffs.

He met the beautiful jet eye and paused. He felt sadness and joy, affection and relief fill him as looked into it.

"You," he said wonderingly and felt the answering warmth flood into his mind.

"Riker..."

The quicksilver presence was there again. "Hello, Cinidh," he said aloud, and thought a thousand other greetings with each word. "I missed you."

"You had to be free, to wake. It was too easy to stay with me. You would have died," her thoughts caressed his.

"You didn't tell me who you were." He leaned against her side, tired from treading water.

"I wanted you to know me as I am, not as the child you took me for, and I wanted to know you."

Riker rested his head against the top of hers. "I'm glad you were there." He lapsed into thought, *That you're here now and that you trusted me enough to tell me who you were.*

Her presence wrapped around his like a warm cocoon and basked in the tenderness of his response.

"Swim with me," whispered Cinidh.

They drifted in lazy spirals for an endless time, Riker aware only that they were moving south. He had somehow moved from the dorsal fin to grip the two trailing pectorals, leaning against her as they turned. He did not feel the chill of the water, or notice the birds overhead, or his own worsening illness. Only the joy of being with her again penetrated his being. Time blurred as they talked and drifted and held each other close in their thoughts.

Only Cinidh knew how close to death Riker had been, how close he might still be. Only by swimming mostly on her side and even sometimes on her back did she manage to keep the Human from slipping away into the hungry sea. The union of their minds kept him from oblivion, kept his hands gripping her fins almost reflexively. She could feel the raging heat of him despite the chill of the water she knew such a thin body must be feeling. Most of all she knew all her work was unravelling, that the fever was killing him, that an infection was spreading faster than she could heal him now.

The great tail increased its beat, forcing them faster through the waves, Riker's presence now a mere thread held fast by hers.

Suddenly Cinidh knew she was not alone. All of her senses screamed as the evil one's animal mind touched hers. It thought only in impulses: feed, mate, hunt, kill...

The flight reflex almost smothered her, blinded her psionically

for a time as she fought it. To abandon Riker was to give him to the depths - or to the Dreht, the evil one.

Cinidh used all of her reserves to get them away from danger but the the evil one continued to follow, waiting, waiting for her to stop, exhausted and vulnerable in the water. In her despair Cinidh turned her mind outward, and called.

No Shysandh would answer that call. She did not want them to. No-one could defeat the evil one, only escape it with their superior speed and agility.

Liane Steadman braced herself as the launch crashed through the incoming swells, its throttles wide open and Sam intent on getting them there in the shortest possible time. She had never seen him so alive, yet so despairing. They were both soaked by spray but Liane had no intention of going below. She listened as Sam bellowed the news that they had passed the ten kilometre mark and was about to move closer to him when her mind exploded.

She collapsed against Sam, who perforce had to stop the boat. As he knelt down he could see that her eyes were glazed, but her expression was not one of distress.

"Shimeon," she said thickly, "get the launch moving again. We have to help them before it's too late."

"Help who?" her husband demanded, at a loss.

Liane's eyes cleared. She leaped up, startling him. "He's alive! We have to get to them before the Dreht does," she told him, powering up the engines herself.

"Liane, what the hell is going on?!" Sam yelled over the noise.

"There's a shark. She told me. Will's friend from the pod. They aren't animals, Sam. He's alive. Do you hear me? Alive!"

He shivered. They were going away from the bearing he had set himself. He looked at his wife's face, searching for an answer. Liane turned to him, a plea in her eyes.

"Can you still hear her?" he asked dubiously.

Liane turned back to the sea but seemed also to turn inward. A few moments later she turned back to him.

"Will was wearing a navy t-shirt and denim shorts."

Sam paled, but hesitated. "How does she know what clothes are?"

Liane laughed. "She doesn't," she yelled, "but there's no need with telepathy. The image, or the understanding, is just there. Trust me."

"All right," he said.

Liane did not hear the words over the roar of the wake and the pounding of the boat. He moved silently to her back and drew the

small body close to his as she steered.

Riker drifted, his mind hopelessly entwined with hers. She allowed the intrusion. The Human's consciousness saw with Shysandh eyes, exploring the vibrant ocean depths even as Cinidh strove to keep his body alive. The Dreht stalked them, aware that something was slowing her down, but also aware that she was no newborn calf, to be taken easily and without a fight.

She shuddered. An attacking dreht spiralled in to its target, its deadly maw wide open, and took its victim in the huge jaws, twisting and twisting until a smaller creature was torn to pieces - and a bigger one was simply torn. The urge to flee returned in an overwhelming tide of terror.

Cinidh sought the comfort of Riker's presence, calling him back from his communion with her people. He came, exultant, happy, contented. Her fear flowed into him and he listened to her anguish. *I didn't know I was that ill. If I'm going to die anyway, dump me, Cinidh. Save yourself. I've heard about what you call the dreht. Don't let it find you.* His love flowed around her in an emotion charged caress. Go, he said.

No, she whispered. *They're coming for you.*

She felt his ripple of surprise. *You contacted them?*

Only the one who watches us. She is coming on the water with the other.

Liane recognised you?

She believed. *She is not what I expected.* Cinidh felt the smile.

You like her?

Yes. Will, the Dreht comes. I have to leave you again. Stay close. I am afraid.

For as long as I last I'll be with you, he told her quietly and felt her presence slip away, leaving only the familiar warmth of her love to hold him to her.

Liane Steadman guided the launch unerringly to the mind that had called to her, refusing Sam's offer to relieve her. Somehow, they had to make it. They were close, she knew that, knew that any moment a beautiful Shysandh outline would come in to view.

For the best part of an hour she had followed a great circle course, to reach them in the shortest possible time, detouring only around the shoal that she instinctively knew would be there.

"There!" cried Shimeon not ten minutes later. He took over the launch and guided it toward the blurry shape on the horizon. As they drew closer they were both able to see the outline of the other. A huge, black mass slid through the water, its jagged dorsal fin an eerie proclamation of its intentions as it cut a path directly toward Cinidh.

Steadman drew an awed breath, then put the craft directly at the helpless cetacean, desperately trying to think of a way to drive it off. It was larger than the launch and the boat carried no weapons.

"Sam, we have to get Bill now. Cinidh's only hope is to run!" cried Liane as they closed the gap.

The water a hundred metres from the pair began to boil. Sam and Liane watched, horrified, as the massive killing machine began to turn. For all its size it had the agility of a fish and considerably more brain than a shark. Cinidh froze with terror. It had begun. Riker was near death and the Human's machine would not reach them in time.

Dump me, Will had said. It echoed in her thoughts over and over as the frenzy in the evil one's mind built to a killing crescendo.

Cinidh screamed. The launch slewed to a halt within metres of Cinidh, now helpless on her back, an unconscious Riker no longer even gripping her fins. Still it came, the giant bronze terror spiralling through the water at a frightening speed. Liane screamed as it plunged straight at the launch, gathering speed with every metre.

"Shimeon!!" she pleaded.

The botanist cut the engines to idle and kept the boat between the predator and the prey, all the time edging closer to Cinidh. It was only ten metres away when the hull of the boat butted gently against Cinidh's side. Five, when Sam threw the stern ladder onto the side gunwhale and climbed down, praying that Cinidh would be able to hold steady. At the bottom of the ladder he was able to just touch Riker's feet.

Somehow through her terror Cinidh realised that she had to get closer, and drifted herself toward the Human.

"Sam!!!!" Liane screamed again.

It was like a slow motion film, the beautiful rose coloured body rising out of the water, its Human cargo slithering ever so slowly into the sea as Steadman flailed about holding on by one hand to the ladder. Then, Sam let go. Suddenly he was plunging down, eyes wide, following Riker, and had him quickly. As he rose, towing the big man, he saw the carnage beneath the waves. The water was filling with blood, and a badly torn Cinidh was diving away from her attacker, a trail of gore in her wake.

A string of obscenities ripped through his mind as he broke the surface. An answering ripple of gentle amusement across his thoughts brought tears to his eyes as he heaved Riker toward the ladder and unhooked the hoist from where he'd left it on the top rung. The hoist was actually the man overboard sling attached to a rope shanked to the anchor chain. He struggled to get it around his friend. "Hit the winch!!" he cried, looking for the beast, but it had larger quarry in mind.

Slowly the anchor winch drew Riker's two hundred odd pounds toward the gunwhale, Sam close behind, guiding him gently. As soon as they had him on the deck Liane began resuscitation, the oxy bottle and first aid chest at her side. Sam found the hypospray kit

and slammed an ampoule into it and pressed it against Riker's blue neck as his wife continued to work.

There was a choking sound. Riker vomited seawater and bile just as she pulled him onto his side.

"Oxygen!"

Sam watched as his friend's chest began to rise and fall, the deathly blue fading a little.

"Shimeon, have we got any antibiotics left in the kit?"

He nodded. "I only gave him the triox ampoule."

"Give it to him. Cinidh said he was dying, that she couldn't keep up with the infection."

The botanist selected the broad spectrum but none-the-less powerful - in deference to their environment - antibiotic and administered it swiftly as Liane moved to get the blankets from the hold.

"Shimeon," she said quietly when she had made Will comfortable, "Cinidh. We have to do something. We can't just leave her like that, any more than we could leave Will."

"I don't know what we can do, even if it isn't already too late, but we have to do something. We'll get Will into our bunk. I want you to watch over him. Get some fluids into him, he's dehydrated to hell. I feel like we should be rushing him somewhere... but we are somewhere. C'mon..."

For several hours Shimeon droned around in a widening circular search pattern, mesmerised by the gentle swells, and hoping that the Shysandh would give Liane some sense of where to look.

Liane had cleaned Will Riker's head wound, shocked at the extent and the seriousness of it, and also the extensive but scabbed wounds on his legs. She monitored his temperature and forced water, which didn't really need to be forced at all, into him. He seemed to know instinctively that he desperately needed fluids and swallowed deeply, without ever showing any sign of waking.

The triox had finally brought the bloom of colour to his cheeks and even extremities like toes and fingers now had colour in them.

All the while the biologist called and called to the brave friend who had saved his life, but only silence answered her. At dusk the Steadmans reluctantly took their friend home, overjoyed at his survival, yet despairing for the friend left behind. The terrible sense of having betrayed a trust settled on them like a yoke and was not lightened even by the sight of their bay, nor the relief of being home.

Sam solved the problem of moving Riker by bringing the AT to the mooring and rousing his friend by hypospray just long enough to get him over the side onto the pontoon, and into the vehicle, where he passed out again right on cue.

Riker roused several times in the first night, but never to

full consciousness. Liane took the opportunity during those periods to force-feed more fluids and a liquid concentrate containing vitamins, minerals, and electrolytes, among other things. After that he rarely stirred. Every day Sam took the launch out to look for Cinidh, and every day Liane waited in vain for her to 'speak'.

Will Riker woke from a nightmare. He sat up and blinked at the light, squinted and closed his eyes again. When his breathing had slowed he looked around.

It was true, it had all been a -

"Will, you're awake. How do you feel?" Liane hurried across the lab.

He frowned. It hurt. "What happened to me?" he said, a knot forming in his stomach as the moment of hope died.

"There was a tremor," she said, sitting on his bed.

"Cinidh!" he said involuntarily, his thoughts reaching out to the Shysandh.

"We don't know," Liane replied. "Sam has been looking every day. We only know that she pulled free and tried to escape."

"Why didn't she just leave me? I was finished anyway."

Liane's eyes filled. "She was waiting for us. Will, she told us you were in danger. We almost made it, but the Dreht was too fast. We almost lost you too."

"Shimeon's all right." He exhaled. "I didn't know. Not for certain," he answered the puzzled look in her eyes. "Liane, if you don't mind I think I would like to be alone for a while," he said distantly.

She nodded, paused, and put her arms around him for a moment. Slowly, Riker returned the embrace. "It's all right," he whispered.

"I'll tell Shimeon," she said quietly, and left.

A large, lonely figure walked slowly along a dawn beach.

Riker had recovered quickly once he was conscious. The antibiotic and the numerous other unnamed concoctions from the medicine chest had done their work. Liane's one and only mediscanner, a multipurpose field model, revealed the extent of his injuries from the cave-in.

A bad skull fracture was almost healed, amazingly, without any sign of trauma to the brain, and both his legs similarly showed extensive and severe fractures almost healed and perfectly knitted.

Liane had shaken her head in amazement, but Riker had sat in silence, moisture glistening in his eyes. The early morning chill made his bones ache, but the smell of the ocean washed away the residue of a sleepless night. He was not very strong and Liane would kill him later, but Riker felt driven to come back, his

thoughts keening despondently into a psionic void.

Slowly, unexpectedly, others joined him. He could hear them, then, one by one, there with him, calling. There were friends from his travels with Cinidh, and those he'd never heard before, all calling in one voice to Cinidh to answer them.

A single figure alone on endless kilometres of beach, silhouetted against a brilliant sunrise, threw back its head, eyes closed, oblivious of the tears it cried, and rose above the cacophony of psionic voices, and touched a tiny, struggling slip of lifeforce. Cinidh!

Riker was running, his chest heaving with the effort of his lungs. The AT was nowhere near fast enough for the Human. He swore at it, berated it, punched it, but it plodded on.

For two long hours Riker clung to the flicker of her presence, until finally, with a parting kick, he was running down to the far end of the bay beyond Sam and Liane's. He climbed a sandhill and found himself hurtling down the other side, which dropped away frighteningly, all the signs of numerous king tides in the gouged out corner of the beach. He made the bottom without falling, but his breath was gone.

He pushed himself to go on to the headland. This headland thrust into itself in a horseshoe shape, a deep tidal recess formed by the wearing of the rocks. Riker climbed over boulders, oblivious of the barnacles and slime, and splashed into the open cave.

She was beached in the shallow pool, the less than two metres of water doing no more than slop occasionally over the pink back, a back partially healed, yet still showing the horror and the immensity of the evil one's attack. Even here her presence was little more than a sigh, but Riker now understood. All the Shysandh's energy was concentrated on healing, on survival.

He waded into the water and laid a hand on her head.

"Let me help," he said aloud, echoing it even more eloquently in his thoughts.

A grunt was forced out of him, as if someone had knocked all of the wind out of him suddenly, and his body slumped across her back. Riker felt himself falling inward, his strength, his love being drawn out of him, spun around the dimmed presence like a cocoon. He drew it to him, as if his great arms had encircled her and cradled her in their protective embrace. Within them a great heat seemed to be generated, a glowing inferno within which, Riker knew, Cinidh's wounds lay open. He poured all of his concentration into that fire, its glow changing from yellow to red to white, a blinding white light, which in a moment of terror brought on by eons of superstition, Riker believed meant they had lost and passed out of life, together.

For an endless time all there was was white. Then, slowly, it began to fade away, leaving only the void. Riker was asleep.

The tide had crept up on the pair in the early hours of the following morning. It washed over the Human, bringing him awake with a start. His legs were numb with cold from dangling in the water and now his previously warm torso was saturated and chilled.

He slid off Cinidh's back, instinctively reaching out to her thoughts. They flowed into his as he looked down and saw the mottled pattern of scars on her back.

Will. Will! I thought you would die. Your friends are very brave. They will be worried about you. We have misjudged them, Cinidh told him, her presence very nearly its old quicksilver self. Riker saw through it. He reached out those same arms and drew her close even as his hand rested gently on her dorsal fin.

"It will take a long time for both of us to be truly healed," he reminded her gently. "And there will be plenty of time for Sam and Liane, much more than there is for us."

Why? Cinidh asked for the first time, revealing a vulnerability Riker had never seen before. And why do you not question us, and why... why must you go?

"You know why, where my future lies," he told her gently. "We will both love again, of our own kind, and know desire, but it will never be like this. For the first time in my life I have known what it is to love for love's sake alone. I will never forget."

Nor I, she echoed sadly. Then the tide was pouring in, the water swollen beyond Riker's depth. He held fast to the thick dorsal fin as Cinidh waited for the tide to peak, lifting her off the sand and allowing her to slide backwards into the deeper waters outside the grotto.

It happened quickly. They were in the open, the sun emerging like a queen from her parlour, to grace another day.

Swim with me, Cinidh whispered for the last time.

Riker pushed away from the great back and waited for her to turn, grasped the two great fins like two tender hands and leaned against her breast as they spiralled lazily through the water. Cinidh turned south as their gentle ballet continued, sometimes guided by her thoughts, sometimes by his; they plunged, and glided, pirouetted and burst through the waves. And then they drifted lazily, allowing their thoughts to intertwine and become one.

"Riker."

Will Riker opened his eyes, suddenly apart again. His hands closed reflexively on the fins he still held.

Cinidh? he thought quizzically.

Look, she said softly. They were in the home bay. There were many tiny figures on the beach. You have to go. They have been frightened. Feel them this once.

Picard, Troi, Beverly, Worf... Sam and Liane...

She felt his convulsive grip as their concern, affection, love, flowed into him through her. Then he was letting go, drifting gently back as she rolled onto her side, a great, glistening jet eye fixed sadly on his.

Will you go back to the pod? he said with difficulty.

No, she whispered. It's time for me to find my own way. I

have already waited too long.

Riker's face tensed with emotion and he glanced back at the beach. "Maybe we both have," he said despondently.

No. Cinidh's presence reached out in a gentle caress. *It is not your time yet... But soon, very soon.*

Wordlessly, he returned the caress. "Goodbye," he whispered, as the great body righted and rolled slowly downward until only the fluke remained. Then it too, was gone.

Riker leaned back in the water and drifted for a few moments on his back, his eyes closed, his mind still touching hers.

Goodbye.

The word held him like a lingering kiss - Cinidh's parting touch. Then she was gone.

Riker turned and struck out in powerful strokes, the intensity of his feelings carrying him far beyond his own energy reserves. Beyond the breakers he bodysurfed most of the way to the shallows and then walked out toward the waiting silhouettes, exhausted.

He stopped a few feet from his Captain and straightened. "You're early," he said, a tired smile bringing a spark to his eyes.

Picard looked at his half naked, dripping wet First Officer, the overgrowth of beard and hair, the loss of weight and the paleness, the scars.

"And a good thing too, I should think," he said softly. "Worf picked up the Steadmans' distress signal."

Riker nodded and turned to the big Klingon. "You just have to come here for a vacation, my friend - all the fish are Klingon," he said wryly.

Worf looked puzzled for a moment, but there was a gleam in his dark eyes.

"If you've gone and got pneumonia after all my hard work...!" Liane scolded in a shaky voice. Riker stepped toward her and caught her in the circle of one big arm.

"I'm sorry," he whispered near her ear, his eyes locked with Sam's dark ones. "I'm sorry," he said aloud. Sam nodded.

Deanna Troi, standing at the botanist's elbow, slid an arm around her friend's waist, felt his rest on her shoulders.

Riker turned back to Jean-Luc Picard. "There was something I had to do. A life was involved," he explained.

Picard shook his head. "Will, you're on vacation, remember?"

Dr. Crusher moved forward. "Will, you're exhausted. I want to do a complete examination as soon as possible. Dr. Steadman has given me all the details and I believe a physical is imperative, at the very least."

"Agreed, Doctor," said Picard, his eyes still on the obviously

drooping Riker. He hit his communicator, then looked at the Steadmans. "Would you care to join us, Doctor? Professor?" The tension went out of their faces. They nodded, almost as one. "Transporter room, seven to beam up at these co-ordinates."

Riker watched the transporter room form around him and then watched it slowly turn on its head.

Worf stepped forward swiftly and caught the collapsing Human. Dr. Crusher struck her communicator. "Sickbay - "

"Doctor," Worf interrupted. "I will take the Commander to sickbay."

Riker woke feeling vastly better than he had in many days. He looked around. Sickbay. He sat up gingerly and flexed his shoulders, his arms. It was very quiet, only the occasional ping or pleep from the various diagnostic indicators around sickbay disturbing the peace.

He took a few seconds to remember why he was there. He sighed, tired of not knowing where he was going to wake up next, and trying hard to ignore the growing emptiness within.

He ran a hand over his face, and discovered that his beard had been clipped. His hair, too, had been cut. He threw the covers back. The scars had gone from his legs, along with the persistent ache deep in the bone. He put a hand to his crown and found only the despised fleet issue grooming spray now touched his hair and scalp. Crusher had been busy.

Still no-one had appeared. He halted an instinctive hand half way to a communicator that was not there. Instead he swung long legs over the side of the bed and carefully slid onto the floor. He was halfway to the comm panel when Worf arrived.

"Sir - " he said, surprised, and then paused, unsure of what to say next.

"Worf. Where the hell is everyone? How long have I been here?"

"It has been eighteen hours. Dr. Crusher is with Dr. Steadman. Captain Picard is on the bridge. Professor Steadman has taken your seat in the weekly poker game... sir."

"Well, am I fit for duty, or not?" Riker growled.

"My instructions were to tell you that you are discharged from sickbay. And that you will not be required for duty until 0800 tomorrow," replied Worf dutifully, following Riker to the sickbay clothes synthesizer.

The big man stepped out of the cubicle a Starfleet Officer once more, the bleakness in his eyes shuttered a moment too late. Worf paused for a beat, then turned to go back to the bridge.

"Worf," Riker said softly, "how did I get to sickbay?"

"With great difficulty, sir," Worf said straight-faced, prompting him to recall Tasha's long ago words about the Klingon's

developing sense of humour.

"Mr. Worf," he said with mock briskness, "do you think Captain Picard would consider it part of your duty to accompany your First Officer to the Ten Forward?"

The gleam was back in the warrior eyes. "Sir, I believe Captain Picard would consider it my duty to follow the orders of a superior officer," he replied in kind.

"Good enough for me," Riker grinned and clapped the Klingon on the shoulder as they strode out of the sickbay.

They talked - or at least Riker talked and Worf listened - for the best part of an hour, the Klingon silently watching the Human trying to deal with pain that was beyond Beverly Crusher's reach. Riker had talked about little of significance, only the beauty of Bremah and the fierceness of its fish, the Enterprise's movements during his absence, and the merit of real beverages and food over most shipboard fare. Worf had listened placidly and heard a great deal more than the Human realised.

When the intercom came to life, the Captain's voice impatiently ordering Worf to the bridge, the Klingon's eyes met the blue ones. He shrugged and rose.

"Worf," Riker said quietly as he turned. "Thanks."

The Klingon nodded, a genuine smile in his eyes, and departed. Riker turned to the vista of stars in the viewport and lost himself in them for a long time. Only when Guinan quietly took the other seat did he stir.

"Guinan?"

"Commander," Guinan smiled gently. "When someone spends as much time staring out that window as you are, they're usually looking for something."

Riker looked at her for a long moment, as if seeing her for the first time. "Maybe it's just because I like stars."

"And maybe it's because you're seeing them differently now," Guinan rejoined.

Riker's eyes widened then narrowed swiftly. "You're about the only one who hasn't offered an opinion or advice about my future. Care to take your shot now?" he said heavily.

"Unnecessary." Guinan's eyes held his. "You've always known what you wanted. The problem is, you found it before you took a command. Nothing else has changed. When you're ready to let go, you'll go."

Riker smiled slowly. "Someone else tried to tell me that," he said softly."

"You should have listened," she told him drily.

"Next time I will." he said.

Guinan's eyes met his. She nodded slowly.

"Commander Riker - "

Riker's communicator came to life.

"What is it, O'Brien?"

"Professor and Doctor Steadman are about to beam down to the surface, sir."

"I'll be right there." He rose and faced his companion. "Guinan..."

The gentle alien nodded, her eyes warm, knowing. She watched him go before collecting the glasses and returning silently to the bar.

Sam and Liane were waiting for him.

"My God, look at you," Sam drawled. "'Your future Captain type'," he quoted. All three smiled at the shared memory of their first meeting.

"When I'm ready," Riker told him, a note of determination in the banter.

"I was wrong about you," said Steadman ruefully. "I thought that Bill Riker had lost something. Like it or not, Will, this is where you belong. It was in your face when you came aboard, in the faces of the people around you."

"Yes, look at you," smiled Liane, looking up at Riker's perfectly groomed head, the military bearing and the new, more formal uniform. "Very impressive," she teased.

Riker smiled at her affectionately.

Shimeon Steadman was watching his friend, regret in his eyes. "Captain Picard had a bunch of seismic equipment beamed down for us. He suggested - very strongly - that I learn how to use it," he said wryly.

Riker's smile widened. "Good," he said.

"It's been too damn short." Sam shook his head as he stepped up on the platform.

"Will you come back, Will?" Liane hesitated.

Riker wrapped his arms around the small Hawaiian for a moment and dropped a kiss on her temple before turning to extend a hand to Shimeon. "I'll be back," he told them quietly.

Liane joined her husband on the transporter pad. "We'll be waiting," Steadman replied, a thread of steel in the bantering tone.

"Don't take too long," Liane added, drawing the blue gaze. She nodded to O'Brien. "Shimeon and I can wait forever, but..." Her voice faded as the transporter effect spirited them away.

He stared after them for a time then turned and almost ran into Troi coming through the door.

"They're gone!" she said, annoyed. "I got caught up with the Maldavs. Their children are going to be the death of me!"

The straight line of Riker's mouth quirked up into a smile. "My personal favourite is Ivor. Last time I saw Ivor he was up a Jeffries tube helping one of Geordi's technicians trace a circuit failure," he recalled as they headed out of the room.

"I didn't hear about that. I suspect that the Captain didn't either. Somehow I don't think he would appreciate knowing that a nine year old was working on the innards of his ship."

"Come to that, neither do I," Riker said ruefully as they stepped into the turbolift.

Troi became serious for a moment. "I'm sorry I missed them. It has been so long. I wanted to spend more time -

"It has been a long time," Riker said thoughtfully. "I was beginning to feel like those times were lost, that I had become... What was it you said when Shelby was aboard?"

"Seasoned," she smiled.

"That wasn't the word I was looking for," he grumbled. "They gave me something back. Bremah gave me something back."

"I know." Deanna looked up at him. He cocked his head questioningly. "At the beach. We were very worried about you." Riker regarded his feet. "You will inform Starfleet that Bremah does support sentient beings?" she asked.

"Of course." Riker looked up.

The turbolift stopped. "Where are you going?" Troi said when he made no move to get off.

"To the bridge."

She shook her head, reached in to grab a handful of sleeve and pulled. Riker followed, bemused. The lift departed. "You are going to rest, whether you like it or not," Troi told him as they reached his quarters.

"Oh?" he grinned. "And how am I going to do that?" he added suggestively. The doors opened obediently and she pushed him in. He turned amiably, blue eyes dancing in the drawn face. "Coming in?" he teased. Her gentle presence flowed soothingly into his weary mind as the doors closed.

On one side Riker smiled as he took the teasing a step further. In the corridor Troi's eyes flashed and her brow creased slightly with the effort to communicate her thoughts.

"*Imzadi...*" her mind whispered seductively, interrupting Riker's erotic devilment, even as she sensed the sadness behind it.

"Deanna?"

"Shut up!"

The ripple of his laughter stayed with her all the way to her office.